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by Sophie Treadwell

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CONTENTS

COVER STORY 14

The war against democracy. John Pilger examines the political credentials of Boris the Good—the man behind the tanks in Moscow's streets

REGULARS

4 Defence Fund News

5 Editorial
Michael Howard and the underclass

6 Felix Bennett

7 Shoreditch, Fourth Estate

8 Diary
Sean French on the Family of the Year, or not

9 John Cole
The barmy army closes in on John Major

10 News From Elsewhere,
Georges Marchais goes at last Helmut Kohl starts his campaign

11 Letter from Ankara
Denis MacShane on Turkey's post-cold war crisis

13 Influences
Michael Moorcock

14 John Pilger
Boris Yeltsin turns against democracy

20 Political column
Sarah Baxter finds the Tories are desperate for leadership

21 Sideliners, Edward Pearce

23 Letters, This England

25 Fringe Benefits

46 Endgames, Salamanca

47 Backchat, Forteana

COVER: AP/Diether Endlicher

FEATURES

12 The Canadian club
Canada's prime minister, Kim Campbell, has remade the Tory Party's image, but elections at the end of the month may see her downfall. Ben Webb reports

15 A capital coup
Was Boris Yeltsin's coup against parliament simply camouflage for a botched economic policy, asks Zhores Medvedev

16 Driving the vermin off the streets
Ian Taylor examines the background to the government's reactionary response to crime

19 Three blind mice
As three junior ministers give evidence to the Scott Inquiry, Patrick Fitzgerald finds the official fog thickening

22 Treasons to be cheerful
Laurie Taylor uncovers conspiracies, pacts, plots and a school for sandals, as he reminisces about the great NSS office disputes he has known

26 SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT

The nature of wealth
Jeremy Seabrook reports on the tribal peoples fighting for their rights in the Borivali National Park in India

Green Gauge
Vicky Hutchings on intellectual property rights and the strange story of the neem tree

28 ARTS IN SOCIETY

A small party
Kirsty Milne feels confined by David Hare's backroom drama of Labour in crisis

Music Liz Evans asks why techno-fanatics keep women out of the studio

Film Jonathan Romney looks into the rough and smooth faces of British movies

TV Jaci Stephen canes the unqualified stupidity of soap

33 AUTUMN BOOKS

Gentleman's relish
Roz Kaveney enjoys 40 years of radical mischief from Gore Vidal

History
Geoff Dyer surrenders to John Keegan's view of war; Ruth Brandon on Jewish rebels

Politics
Tony Wright MP confronts Labour's new-left gravediggers; Victoria Brittain regrets Helen Suzman's liberal blinkers

Lives
Michèle Roberts revives a tragic heroine; Fraser Harrison on the court of Gavin Maxwell

Fiction
Douglas Kennedy on Paul Theroux's fibrous fraud; Mary Loudon on A N Wilson

PrintOut
Russian poetry at large

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Legendary jazz singer Maxine Daniels is one of the stars making *New Statesman* Defence Fund's music hall night, next week, extra special. She will be joined by Deryk Parkyn, character comedian from the famous Players Theatre, and Nikki Young who is as popular as a panto dame as he is on the club and cabaret circuit. All are favourites at the atmospheric Brick Lane Music Hall – and will be introduced by the skills of owner, theatre director and fab MC . . . Vincent Hayes.

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Andrzej Krauze

Family favourites

Michael Howard is not only courting the right of the Conservative party; he has gone down on his knees with a bunch of gladioli and a box of Milk Tray. In Blackpool this week, the Home Secretary was murmuring words guaranteed to get his girl into a frenzy: single parents, family values, moral responsibility—with crime close behind.

This particular chat-up line is becoming monotonous. In July, we had Welsh Secretary John Redwood on the same theme. Now Environment Secretary John Gummer is looking at ways of ousting young single mothers from the front of the housing queue. Family values are back in town; stigma is back in fashion.

The British are usually bashful in these matters, so it was quite a shock to hear Howard's proposals for population control (the benefits system, he suggested, should be used to deter single mothers from having more than one child). Perhaps the minister has been listening to Charles Murray, US sociologist and theorist of the "underclass". Murray, who first applied his ideas to the UK in 1989, is back in the country for an update. At the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs last week, he cheerfully assured his audience that Britain is "heading for an authentic catastrophe".

Murray's ideas, publicised by the *Sunday Times*, have passed into vague and general currency. His "underclass" is a particular subset of the poor, who live in a different world from the rest of us—a different world, too, from the hard-working, "deserving" poor. Murray's underclass is a phenomenon of the inner city, characterised by high illegitimacy rates, drop-out from the labour market, and crime. The underclass member is defined "not by his condition, long-term unemployed, but by his deplorable response to that condition, unwilling to take the jobs that are available to him". Sound familiar?

Anyone with an interest in combating Murray's ideas needs to invest in some clear thinking. For "underclass" is used by liberals to mean something different: to describe people marginalised by unemployment, caught in the poverty trap, ghettoised in areas with high crime rates and low quality of life. Increasingly unlikely to appear on the electoral register, they are citizens excluded from society. From this perspective, the "two-thirds, one-third society" is something to be ashamed of, not a target for moral censure.

Long-term unemployment has inflicted a profound psychic shock on a nation whose economic success was built on the Protestant work ethic. Murray says very little about it; ministers, not surprisingly, rarely refer to it. But in areas with no jobs, it is a tall order to expect people to retain a sense of optimism and self-worth. Dropping out of the labour market altogether is not necessarily an index of fecklessness: it may be a rational choice. As for moral engineering, there is evidence that government efforts to push people back into work simply shove them sideways—onto invalidity benefit, for example.

To some extent, therefore, the Conservatives are blaming their own victims, a point forcefully made by Ian Taylor in his account of Tory penal policy (see page 16). But the stigmatising of single parents taps into real popular fears about the fluidity of the family. This week, Howard explicitly brought crime into the equation, suggesting that children without fathers were more likely to grow up aggressive and more likely to turn to crime.

It is hard to coordinate a left response to such vague and insidious attacks. Lone mothers have been doughtily defended by Sue Slipman, of the National Council for One-Parent Families, who points out that 70 per cent of single parents are divorced, separated or widowed. She also highlights the fact that "illegitimacy" and single parenthood do not go together. The family is not dying but metamorphosing, as Yvonne Roberts has argued (*NSS*, 24 September). Many children born outside marriage are born into stable relationships. In 1991, three-quarters of such births were jointly registered, more than half by parents living at the same address.

Illegitimacy is not the issue. One child in three is now born outside marriage, and it is positively Canute-like of ministers to try and hold back the tide. Marriage itself is no guarantee of stability: we have the highest divorce rate in the EC. Promoting stable relationships is one thing, but trying to force people to get married is quite another.

It is harder to dispute the desirability of fathers. Here there is some agreement between right and left. Like Howard, Murray maintains that a boy without a male role model is not properly socialised, and may fall into "predatory sexual behaviour as well as crime". Feminists worry about this too. Although the Child Support Agency has been attacked for harrassing mothers, and for construing parenthood in purely financial terms, the idea that fathers should be responsible for their children has widespread support.

There will, however, always be women with good reasons for bringing up a child on their own. Their freedom of choice (oh yes!) should be defended. What's more, they should be supported by proper child care facilities. Despite everything the Conservatives say about families, this country continues to treat child care as a problem for the individual mother to solve on her own.

The "underclass" debate is a minefield for Labour politicians, but one they should enter if the pass is not to be sold. Murray's answer, to "unleash voluntarism", has merit: places like Easterhouse in Glasgow have shown the value of self-help. But the decimation of local government is strangling such efforts.

Labour can offer what the Tories, caught between economic *laissez faire* and moral *dirigisme*, cannot: a belief in communities, which Tony Blair and others have been promoting. With a clear strategy for the inner cities, and a fresh look at a "basic income" for all, Labour could liberate the single mother from her bogeywoman straitjacket.

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Pollwatch

Organisation	Pub date	Sample	Con %	Lab %	Lib Dems %	Other %
ICM/Guardian	17 Sept	1,403	27 (28)	45 (40)	24 (28)	5 (5)
MORI/Times	24 Sept	1,819	29 (28)	43 (42)	25 (25)	3 (5)
Gallup/Daily Telegraph	4 Oct	1,042	23 (25.5)	44.5 (46.5)	27 (23)	5.5 (5)
Gallup 9000/ Daily Telegraph	4 Oct	10,736	24.3 (23.7)	45 (42.9)	24.7 (28.3)	6 (5.1)

The previous month's polls are given in brackets

No great cheer for Conservative ladies in Blackpool this week: the most recent polls show the Tories bumping along the bottom. The party of government is still competing with the Liberal Democrats for second place in the ratings war. When you consider that, as recently as April, Tory support was hovering in the low thirties, John Major's troops have cause for gloom indeed. The latest Gallup 9000 poll for the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, puts the Conservatives on 24.3 per cent, below the Liberal Democrats on 24.7 per cent, and well below the Labour Party on 45 per cent.

A more amusing pastime for the party faithful, as they withhold standing ovations from yearning cabinet ministers, might be to peruse the "sincerity ratings" published with the *Daily Telegraph*'s Gallup snapshot poll of 10 September. People were asked whether they thought various politicians were sincere—"not in the sense that you agree with them or not, but in the sense that you think they are usually telling the truth or not". Bottom of the class came Health Secretary Virginia Bottomley, whose pronouncements on the Health Service have evidently earned her an audience of sceptics. Of those questioned, 59 per cent felt that she was insincere.

Less widely reported, but equally interesting, was the identity of the runner-up in the insincerity stakes. It was the candid, straightforward, cigar-smoking, undeclared leadership contender: Kenneth Clarke.

The right and left of the party continue their ideological tussle over tax increases. But Tory supporters do not appear to be panting for tax cuts: quite the contrary. The ICM/*Guardian* poll of 6 September made the surprising discovery that 73 per cent of Conservative voters agree with the proposition: "It is better to pay higher taxes and have better public services than lower taxes and worse services." Only 15 per cent demur.

Given this enthusiasm for public services, Central Office must have been disturbed to learn that only 43 per cent of Conservative voters agree with the statement: "The NHS is safer in Mr Major's hands", while 40 per cent disagree. Last year, by contrast, 60 per cent were happy to endorse the Prime Minister's stewardship, and only 17 per cent disputed it.

As for the government's new range of autumn offerings, the electorate don't think much of them. A MORI poll for the *Times*, published on 30 September, found that 92 per cent oppose the imposition of VAT on heating bills. This figure rises to an astonishing 99 per cent in Scotland. No wonder the SNP have chosen to put the issue at the top of their campaign agenda.

Scotland remains a Tory headache. The party took an unexpectedly high 26 per cent of the vote at the general election; but 1993 has seen their ratings slide. On 6 September, a System Three poll in the *Glasgow Herald* found the Tories slumping to a low of 15 per cent, with Labour at 45 per cent, the Liberal Democrats at 16 per cent, and the SNP steady at 24 per cent.

Scottish Conservatives are sufficiently alarmed to think about unsheathing the secret weapon they used in the election campaign—defence of the union. Some are even suggesting that the party north of the border should rename itself "the Scottish Unionist Party"—to attract voters who are nervous of devolution or independence.

FELIX BENNETT

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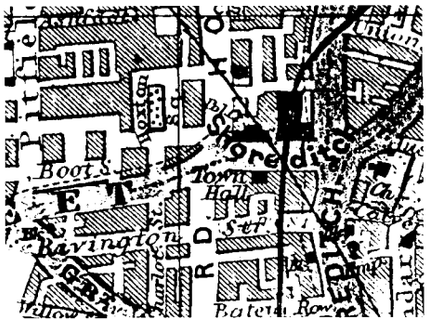

Not the most exciting subject, tunnels. Or so Shoreditch thought before discovering that the opening shots are already being fired in the How To Celebrate the Chunnel Opening debate. Locals—who, after all, will have to live near the thing—are clamouring for community-based celebrations like street parties, firework displays and town-twinnings. But it seems Eurotunnel has other, more glamorous ideas; the men and women in suits want a specially staged opera. The current favourite is a performance of Verdi's Aida. Before the planning gets too advanced, let's hope somone reminds them of the opera's unhappy ending; at the climax of the final act, the two protagonists end up buried alive.

A funny thing happened on the way home from the Labour Party conference last week, Shoreditch has just heard; Anne Bradley and Kathleen Duffy were both in Brighton to speak at a Troops Out fringe meeting on ways to achieve peace in Northern Ireland. Joining them on the same platform were MPs Tony Benn, Jeremy Corbyn and Bill Etherington. Bradley and Duffy are both members of the Belfast-based group Relatives for Justice, and have respectively lost a husband and son at the hands of British forces in Northern Ireland. The meeting also touched upon human-rights abuses in the province, such as the iniquities of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. So it wasn't, perhaps, as much a surprise as it would otherwise have been when, at Gatwick airport, Bradley and Duffy noticed an officious man shadowing them, and then following the two women onto their flight home. Or that, when they arrived at Belfast airport, the same man rushed ahead of them to join a group of security officials in an interrogation of the two travellers, about such information vital to the security of the nation as "Where have you been?" and "What were you doing there?" Who says nobody takes any notice of what goes on at Labour conference any more?

Shoreditch is excited by the prospect of British Telecom's launch of The BT Young Naturalist of the Year Awards 1993. Still pushing its greener-than-thou image, BT thinks the awards will encourage "young children to learn about the fascinating and unusual ways in which animals communicate with one another". Apparently, says BT, getting into the spirit of the thing, "bats use ultrasound, kangaroos, hares and rabbits thump their hind legs, and a female elephant calling her calf will simply slap her ears against the side of her head". Well, blow me down. And humans use . . . don't tell me, I'll have it in a minute . . . of course, that's it, the telephone. MAKE SOMEONE HAPPY, PHONE HOME!

Hopefully this public-relations coup will make people forget what has been happening in Scotland, where the telephone numbers of 134 police stations in the Strathclyde region have been left out of the Glasgow-area phone book. The only listing still in the book is the Police Social Club at Barrhead. It's all a bit of a mystery, which the police have blamed on "an administrative error and delay between the police and British Telecom". But the problem remains how the public can get in touch, since the police are being very firm about not dialing 999 when it's not absolutely urgent. The answer, surely, is obvious: either dial the Social Club's number and ask to be transferred. Or, even better, phone BT and reverse the charges.

Regular readers may recall that last year NSS was robbed of victory in the annual end-of-Labour-conference quiz organised by barmy-left monthly magazine Labour Briefing. On that occasion, the reason given publicly by Briefing quizmaster Keith Veness for denying us our rightful place on the winner's rostrum was that we'd failed to list correctly the ingredients of a fruit cake—although Veness later admitted privately: "It wouldn't have been politically correct to let NSS win." Last week, however, we got our revenge in the 1993 Briefing quiz, coming first by a wide margin—despite unsporting obstacles such as "extra rounds" and "discretionary points" being lavished on other teams as soon as NSS pulled ahead of the field. The prize was this delightful artist's impression (see below) of Labour leader John Smith, current Briefing Class Traitor of the Month. Is there anyone out there who dares take on the NSS quiz team now?

FOURTH ESTATE

A regular monitor of the tabloid press

30 September: The *Daily Mirror* has no doubt about the significance of John Smith's Labour Party conference victory on the small matter of how to select parliamentary candidates: "Brave win by Smith paves way to power," screams its front page. The *Sun* has different ideas. Smith has won, says its leader column, only at a price not worth paying. "His 'new exciting agenda' restores the unions' stranglehold on the nation. Under Labour, back would come the closed shop, pickets, strikes."

1 October: The *Sun* decides to fuel fears about immigration by smuggling a reporter into Britain in the boot of a car on the Calais-Dover ferry: "We prove how easy it is to smuggle an immigrant into UK," reads the headline. In the *Daily Express*, the story is podgy transport minister Steven Norris's love life: "Married Mr Norris has just jilted one mistress for another. And his wife has taken the children to live near her parents."

2 October: The *Mail* returns to Labour conference. "Let us look at the facts," says a leader. "1. Unions sponsor every elected member of the shadow cabinet and most Labour MPs. 2. Unions still have 70 per cent of conference votes. 3. Unions have a third of the electoral college which picks the party leader. 4. Unions have nearly half the seats on the vitally important National Executive Committee."

3 October: "Gorgeous" George Galloway relates an experience at Labour conference in the *Sunday Express*. "I spotted Ann Pettifor and Annie Marjoram, hitherto champions of women's rights, abortion rights, Irish rights, rank-and-file rights etc . . . Both glided past me with red lips, earrings, smart clothes and looking, dare I say it, quite fanciable."

4 October: The *Sun*'s eve-of-Tory-conference readers' survey contains little to comfort John Major. Two-thirds of *Sun* readers think that he should resign, and more than half would like Margaret Thatcher to come back. Worse, 86 per cent oppose VAT on fuel, 79 per cent are against rail privatisation and 60 per cent oppose the public sector pay freeze.

5 October: There's no doubt about the best story today: the *Mirror*'s piece on Thatcher's memoirs, for the serialisation rights of which the *Sunday Times* has paid £750,000. "Lady Thatcher thinks John Major is small-minded, politically naive and an intellectual lightweight," runs the front-page lead story.

6 October: The *Mirror* is still on a roll with the Thatcher memoirs ("the political scoop of the year", as it puts it modestly). It is particularly pleased with the failure of *Sunday Times* editor Andrew Neil's attempt to get a High Court injunction against it. "This is a victory for freedom of the press," opines a leader. "The tragedy is that it was won against the *Sunday Times*, once a proud upholder of the best journalistic standards."

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Sean French on the dire consequences of Family of the Year awards

Do you know a family that is insufferably smug? Do you hate them? Would you like to vent your spleen upon them in a way that is both effective and secret? I have the perfect solution for you. All that is necessary is to nominate them for the Barclays Life Family of the Year, which I have just picked up from that rack of leaflets in my local branch usually devoted to invitations to unwary customers to take loans they can't afford in order to buy things they don't need.

The most extraordinary aspect of this grotesque award is that it is presented in collaboration with Relate—formerly known as the Marriage Guidance Association—which ought to know better. As I write, it is just a fortnight ago that a coroner's court ruled that a woman who in 1992 was named Mother of the Year committed suicide in 1993. Her marriage had broken up almost immediately after the award, and earlier this year her second relationship had acrimoniously collapsed. She laid out the clothes for her three young children, and then left the house and threw herself in front of a train.

It was, in its horrifying way, a fitting rebuke to our *Blind Date*, *Game for a Laugh* world, that cheery camcorder culture of happy families in which the tots are always coming out with the cutest things, dad is seeing the funny side of long-term unemployment and mum is at home getting dinner on the table, and somehow keeping the whole household ticking over in that mysterious way that women have.

And if mum sometimes gets depressed at having to spend her life looking after an incontinent senile relative, or being compelled to support the family by working long hours in a unionised sweatshop, well, then we can just tell her that she's the best mum in the world, or write to Cilla and arrange for her to have some patronising practical joke played on her.

For many people, much of the time, operating the institution known as the family is not like starring in a sit-com or entering a talent contest. It's like planning and executing the D-Day Normandy landings seven days a week. During a recession, it's like attempting it with your feet tied together.

A Mother of the Year award can only have been an, unwelcomely public, added burden. If you've been selected by experts as the most wonderful matriarch in the country, how do you ask your friends for help when your marriage starts falling apart? Then, after the marriage had failed, the guilt at failing to live up to a meaningless standard can scarcely have been the best way to make another relationship work.

The list of counterproductive awards is legion, like Young Businesspeople of the Year who have promptly gone bust. In his book on advertising, David Ogilvy commented on the absurdity of the "Clio" awards for creativity in television commercials: "Of 81 television classics picked by the Clio festival in previous years, 36 of the agencies involved had either lost the account or gone out of business." Then there is Ernest Hemingway. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954, it served principally as a cruel reminder of his failing powers.

The history of the Nobel Prize in itself serves as a parable of the problems in rewarding achievement. Even in the supposedly objective world of physics and chemistry, the scrabblings and manoeuvrings have been squalid enough. While millions of people around the world struggle with their Aids-induced symptoms, scientists are still bickering with each other about who first identified the virus, and accusing each other of having tampered with slides in order to secure the decisive precedence.

The results of winning the prize can be disastrous. The 1976 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Northern Ireland activists, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams. The point of their hitherto triumphant progress had been their lack of political or ideological status. In their naive way, they had been representing the silent majority who wanted peace above all else. When they received the award and, far from incidentally, the money that went with it, the whole campaign collapsed with all sorts of jealousies and bitter recriminations. The Nobel Committee had spotted a frail orchid and tried to aid its growth by dropping two tons of fertiliser on it from a great height. Corrigan and Williams, who had looked for a while as if they might set the history of Ulster on a new happy course, are now the sort of names who turn up in "Where Are They Now?" features in magazines.

Ann Leck, the chair of Relate, who ought to know about the results of stress on families, has collaborated with the managing director of Barclays Life on an announcement for the 1994 award that is in itself a collector's item. Next year, they inform us, will be the United Nations International Year of the Family, which sounds about as reassuring as the Serbian Year of Civic Responsibility.

I suspect somebody had a few last-minute qualms, judging from the evasive, almost guilty tone of the text, confused in thought and syntax: "The award pays tribute to every family—not just the eventual winners—that is able to give its all to each other and the community at large, despite the increasing pressures that day-to-day life brings to bear." That sounds like a lot of "alls" to be doling out. How precisely is it meant to function? Perhaps you are meant to allocate half your all to the family and the rest of it to the community. And is it such a good thing? Virtually every evening I feel that my all has gone missing, but I don't want an award for it. I just wish I'd kept some of it for myself.

I have at least discovered a simple test to discover if your family need not apply for this award, based on my own experience. The test is that you read, as I recently did, an account of Sylvia Plath's suicide (in my case, the remarkable article by Janet Malcolm in a recent *New Yorker*). If you feel, as I did, that this couldn't happen to me, not because I am so happy and fulfilled in my life and distributing my all to everybody within range, but because a) the type of household gas has been changed so that it is no longer toxic, and b) even if it hadn't been there would be no chance of my being able to lie with my head in the oven for long enough, day or night, without being dragged out of it in order to make a sandwich or a bowl of cereal or heat up a cup of milk in precisely the right sort of cup, which has been lost somewhere around the house but is the only one that milk can possibly be drunk out of.

But why are Barclays involved in such a competition? According to the anouncement: "Barclays Life also makes a valuable contribution in providing the financial stability, security and protection the modern family requires." Oh, do they? As a person who has an account with Barclays and has been on the receiving end of their protection, I would not necessarily go every inch of the way with them on that one. I thought that the principal contribution of Barclays and the other high-street banks to society during the years of the recession had been to attempt to recoup the losses made on their irresponsible and self-serving loans to the third world, by squeezing their domestic customers and small-business debtors when they could least afford it.

"We're not looking for the ideal family, but more the kind that displays some or all of the characteristics that seem in sadly short supply nowadays." What can these characteristics that are in such short supply be? Do they mean money? Do they mean a job? "For example, one that shows the ability to love, support and care for one another." I was right both times.

If Barclays really wanted to do something to help British families they could have taken the money spent on these brochures, on the bureaucracy of organising the competition, and on the "Gala Luncheon in London early next year", and used it to save some of the small companies they will be closing down in the intervening period. That would keep some families together, and save Relate work too.

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The barmy army closes in on Major

Party conferences are notoriously like hothouses. But we must mix our metaphors to describe politics as a whole. This is not so much a single hothouse, but a series of those overheated habitations, constructed on the Russian doll principle, with conferences, parliament, party members, supporters, voters all fitting neatly, though feverishly, into each other's skins.

And then, of course, there are the media. Now (adopting that ancient formula of prejudice), some of my best friends—in fact *most* of my best friends—are media people. But I wonder if we are becoming more susceptible than we used to be to a form of collective madness, brought on by the tendency to hunt in packs.

For good or bad reasons, the press, especially the Conservative press, has tasted blood in the departure of David Mellor, Norman Lamont and Michael Mates. Three down and one to play . . . ? But is this a good way to run the country?

The occasion of these heterodox thoughts is my return after four months away from the hothouse atmosphere. I have spent much of this time—mostly pleasure, some work—in France, Spain and Austria, insulated almost completely from British papers and broadcasts. I confess that, on my return, I found the excited state of opinion about the Prime Minister's prospects of keeping his job somewhat bewildering.

True, the fervour has now subsided a little, and subject to how he emerges after the dust of Blackpool has settled, John Major seems safe until what I have always believed was the dangerous time for him, after the local council and European elections in the early summer of 1994. If the Tories suffer further serious reverses then, they might think it foolish to delay any longer in forcibly changing their leader.

But there would still be plenty of time to instal a new man. (Unfortunately, there are no probable women on the horizon.) Indeed, looking back at the evidence of what happened after the leadership was transferred from Thatcher to Major, there may be merit in not giving a fresh face long enough to lose its infant sheen, not to say innocence. If Margaret Thatcher had been removed in 1988, instead of 1990, would John Major, tarnished by four years at the top, still have won the 1992 general election?

The problem for those in the Conservative Party who are most virulently hostile to Major is that they do not have an obvious candidate ready to succeed him. On ability, Michael Portillo has always seemed like the best right-wing candidate, but the assumption, until John Major ran into trouble, has been that Portillo would one day be fighting someone of his own generation from the left wing, someone like Stephen Dorrell, another Treasury minister.

Now the right faces a grim prospect. What could they do if a vacancy did occur this year, or more probably next, either through a stalking-horse candidate, or because the men in grey suits had delivered the pearl-handled revolver? In either circumstances, Kenneth Clarke looks like a shoo-in.

If Clarke were to succeed, there would be one odd similarity in the three most recent transfers of leadership. When Edward Heath had lost the two 1974 elections, he refreshed his opposition front-bench team by appointing the relatively unknown Margaret Thatcher as number two to his rather laid-back Treasury spokesman, Robert Carr.

If Margaret Thatcher had been removed in 1988, not 1990, would Major still have won the 1992 election?

She seized her chance, and put on sparkling performances in the Finance Bill debates, as the bruised Tories worked out their frustrations on Denis Healey, who was by then struggling with the economic crisis he inherited from Ted Heath's chancellor, Tony Barber.

The Treasury portfolio enhanced her hitherto mundane parliamentary reputation, and she used this as a launching pad for her leadership campaign the following year.

Heath's biographer, John Campbell, blames him for not realising what a risk he was taking in promoting her to such a high-profile post. But at the time, few took Margaret Thatcher seriously as a potential successor.

Thirteen years later, Thatcher, having already given Major accelerated promotion to foreign secretary, switched him to the chancellorship when Nigel Lawson resigned.

That put John Major in the frame when she herself had to resign, for the Treasury, in government or opposition, is the making or breaking of an ambitious politician. But when Margaret Thatcher made this, her last choice for chancellor, the threat to her leadership was perceived to come from Michael Heseltine, whom she had carelessly left roaming the backbenches. Anyhow, if she *had* to go, John Major was her favoured successor.

If it is a mistake to give a potential rival the Treasury, Major has completed the hat-trick by doing it for Ken Clarke. Yet after the Prime Minister's long and ill-advised attempt to hang on to the doomed Norman Lamont, he could not afford to appoint a nonentity as Chancellor.

He badly needed what is called "a political Chancellor", and Clarke is certainly that, the most political since Jim Callaghan. But if a Prime Minister chooses a real politician for the job, he must expect him to have ambitions. (Harold Wilson found that out about Callaghan, too.)

The Tories are fated for some years yet to live in the shadow of Margaret Thatcher. I made a *Panorama* film two years ago, less than a year after Major took over from her. It posed what I still think is the essential—and unanswered—question: was John Major offering the voters a new government, or a continuation of 11 years of undiluted Thatcherism?

We are still no further from learning the truth. His present troubles derive from that unresolved question. In my judgment, he won the general election, against the odds, by manifestly *not* being Margaret Thatcher.

Major appealed to voters who had grown weary of being hectored and shouted at by Margaret Thatcher, who wanted, as my mother used to say, "just to get their heads shired" (ie, cleared).

And if he was not Margaret Thatcher, he was also quite unlike Ted Heath, whose brusquely rude attitude to his backbenchers left him with too few allies when he needed them.

Despite his occasional solecisms about bastards, barminess and a deficiency of apples, John Major's failings are not his personal style. For all his many problems, it is fair to say that he is still widely liked in his own party and by the public. Where he has run into trouble is through his failure to cut himself off from the free-market ideological legacy of his predecessor.

Every privatisation, and particularly that of British Rail, now seems a bridge too far. The addiction to indirect taxation, part of a similar Thatcherite ideological prejudice against income tax, has landed him—via Lamont's crass decision to have a two-stage VAT fuel levy—in the biggest political bog since the poll tax.

But without sticking my neck out too far, after only a week back in Britain, I believe John Major will survive his immediate crisis, if that is what it really is. Next year is another matter. His fate then is in the lap of the economic and electoral gods.

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Marchais goes at last

It is a rare knack indeed for a politician to keep his eyes closed in a changing world and survive. But Georges Marchais, the veteran leader of the French Communist Party (PCF), has built a whole career doing just that, calling himself a Stalinist long after Stalin, and rallying the forces of the French proletariat long after the French proletariat had stopped voting for him. For years, he has hung on in there, addressing the faithful at every opportunity in his uniquely forceful, rasping voice, and thumping his pudgy fists in indignation at the evils of capitalism. You have to admire the man's tenacity, if not his judgment.

Now, however, an era is coming to an end: Marchais announced last week that he is retiring. Writing from hospital, where he is recovering from a hip operation, Marchais told a party meeting that, at the age of 73, he had decided to bow to the inevitable and would step down as general secretary at the PCF's forthcoming congress in January. The announcement set off the odd twinge of nostalgia: after 23 years at the top of his party he has become an apparently permanent fixture in the French political landscape, as immovable in his way as the ideas he espouses. Even Jacques Toubon, the conservative minister of culture, said that he was sorry to see Marchais go.

And yet his departure comes not a moment too soon for the French left. Even diehard loyalists cannot conceal the fact that Marchais has reduced a party that was once the driving force of the French left to a shadow of its former self.

Back in the early 1970s, the PCF was scoring well over 20 per cent in elections and had the largest membership of any political party in France. Today, it can be sure of only 7 per cent of the electorate, and members are leaving in droves.

Part of the decline, to be sure, is due to the worldwide backlash against communism following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. But much of the rot had set in sooner. Already in the mid-1980s, the PCF's popularity had dropped below 10 per cent as voters tired of the party's excessive dogmatism and creaking organisational structures.

Such was the authoritarianism of Marchais' leadership style that much of the blame must lie at his door. His mentor was the long-serving PCF general secretary, Maurice Thorez; Thorez' mentor in turn was Joseph Stalin. They all adhered to the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, under which all power and decision-making is concentrated in the party leader; it may be no coincidence that Marchais is stepping down just as the PCF prepares to ditch democratic centralism once and for all.

For much of his career, Marchais seemed to be living in some kind of Stalinist 1950s timewarp. He supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 despite the opposition of the then PCF leader, Waldeck Rochet; he supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; and he approved of the crackdown on Solidarity in Poland the following year. He showed little enthusiasm for Gorbachev, and lambasted Yeltsin's role in thwarting the Moscow coup of 1991.

The only time he looked serious about reform was during the Eurocommunism movement of the mid-1970s, when he dropped the doctrine that dictatorship of the proletariat must precede full communism. But the much-awaited breakthrough never came. Francois Mitterrand wrested control of the French left from him and gave the Communists only a minor and shortlived role in his first Socialist government in 1981. The PCF has gone downhill ever since.

Marchais' departure could, at a pinch, offer new life to his party. The Socialists are now in disarray themselves, following their heavy electoral defeat in March. The left needs new blood and new ideas for next year's European elections and the presidential race in 1968.

But the chances of a PCF renaissance look distinctly limited. Before he announced his departure, Marchais had successfully weeded out his reformist opponents within the party. The former transport minister, Charles Fiterman, once Marchais' right-hand man and now an ardent advocate of realignment on the left, commands less than 10 per cent of the party's central committee. André Lajoinie, the PCF's presidential candidate in 1988, is handicapped because he lost his parliamentary seat in March. The succession is almost impossible to predict because of the secretive workings of the party leadership, which the reformists describe as "bordering on the monarchical". Marchais' faction is still very much in charge, at least for the moment.

Andrew Gumbel

15 YEARS AGO

"Dear Bruce Page"
13 October 1978

Michael Foot replies to the New Statesman's criticisms of Jim Callaghan's Labour government

No one will attempt to deny that those who have resolved to sustain the government have had many painful choices to make. But the alternative was to run away, to yield almighty power at such a dangerous moment in our history to the Thatcher-Keith Joseph counter-revolution. This, I have always believed, would be the real betrayal of those who elected us.

This, by the way, seems to be the course of action recommended by Mr Christopher Hitchens who drools such a steady flow of malicious tittle-tattle into your columns. May I ask: is he a member of the Labour Party which he so pompously admonishes? Is he one of Paul Johnson's prodigies left behind to serve the Thatcherite cause? Or is he truly what he is widely alleged to be, a dilettante self-styled Trotskyite, New Statesman Nigel Dempster, the Socialist Workers' William Hickey? My apologies to Trotsky: nothing so squalid was ever associated before with his great name.

Michael Foot

Christopher Hitchens replies: **Mr Foot is entitled to his ad hominem remarks, though to be accused of fakery by him is like being sold hair tonic by a man as bald as an egg.**

Kohl starts his campaign

Chancellor Helmut Kohl's televised broadcast to the nation on the third anniversary of German unification last Sunday was a model of fatherly concern and modesty.

His brow furrowed in studied empathy as he understood the "worries" of east Germans. His face then regained its more usual earnest expression as he laid particular stress on the words: "We will overcome our economic and social problems." And the full spectrum of human emotion was complete when his eyebrows raised themselves in modesty: "However, this process will take longer and cost more money than most of us—*including myself*—believed it would."

The performance fitted precisely Kohl's desired new public image. The German leader wants to be seen as a benevolent father-of-the-nation figure, increasingly above petty party-political disputes, unruffled by the new era's problems, someone who always has a word of smilingly-given advice. Despite a marathon of 18 separate elections next year (including a national election in late October), he has rarely criticised the opposition Social Democrats (SPD), even offering the new SPD chair, Rudolf Scharping, joint policy talks.

But Kohl is a wolf in sheep's clothing. As the leader of the SPD group in the Bundestag, Hans-Ulrich Klose, put it recently, "Kohl only does this sort of thing when his position is threatened." Kohl is out to regain as many lost votes for his Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), as he can. And one way of preventing the SPD from doing the same would be to have talks with it, then, after negotiations end in a chaos of irreconcilable positions, portray Scharping and his team as not ripe for government based on compromise.

The other element of Kohl's strategy is to squeeze the far right—even though he told last month's CDU party conference in Berlin that there would be "no move to the right with

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NEWS FROM ELSEWHERE

me". Having forced through the tightening of what used to be some of the world's most liberal asylum laws, the Christian Democrats' new buzz-issue is crime—which just happens to be top of many Germans' list of worries, especially in east Germany where Kohl has lost much support.

Last week, the new interior minister, Manfred Kanther (considered further right than his predecessor), set out a new "law and order package". Among the measures proposed are harsher sentences for criminals between the age of 18 and 21. The Christian Democrats have presented this idea as a useful weapon against violent racists, many of whom are young. But lawyers and criminologists have pointed to a false assumption: what is essentially a social problem cannot be solved by harsher forms of punishment.

The crime rate is rising fast, but this is mainly because the energy of criminals in east Germany is beginning to match that of their western counterparts. And the irony of this fear campaign and the package of measures proposed by Kanther is that the government's law-and-order record since unification has been pitiful.

Of the police force posts planned, some 10,000 remain empty. One officer in the east German state of Brandenburg said recently that he was "reduced to administrating crime". There weren't "enough officers" to cope. And the existing police force has repeatedly complained of bad working conditions. Last month, the head of Berlin's police force said that his officers' equipment was "miserable".

So, at a time when the country is far from united and badly needs a vision for the future, Germany is laden with a leader looking to make electoral profit out of problems that he has failed to resolve. Rather than invest in more police, Kohl and his party prefer to call for harsher laws against young offenders, laws, that criminologists say, will take away opportunities to win people back for society.

And the crowning glory of the Christian Democrats' move to the right is one in which Kohl is personally involved. With a new president set to be chosen by an electoral assembly next May, the Christian Democrat leader has set his heart on the figure of Steffen Heitmann, the justice minister of the east German state of Saxony.

In the three weeks since Heitmann hit the headlines as Kohl's choice for president, liberal and left-of-centre Germans have been appalled by his statements: from his "understanding for citizens who feel threatened" by the influx of asylum-seekers, to his call for Germany's Nazi past to be allowed to take its place within the rest of German history, it has become clear that he is a right-wing conservative who believes, above all, in the traditional virtues of law, order and discipline.

To cap it all, on Monday this week the news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported the opinion of Franz Schönhuber, the leader of the extreme right-wing Republikaner party: "I agree with most of Mr Heitmann's opinions."

Christopher Springate

LETTER FROM ANKARA

Visiting Ankara for the first time in 15 years, I have found this once sleepy, dowdy, smog-covered city remarkably changed.

The city was plonked in the middle of the Anatolian desert in 1923 by Kemal Attaturk, the first president of the Turkish republic, to break the Ottoman stranglehold on Istanbul and to create a capital for a post-imperial, secular and 20th-century nation-state. Attaturk's successors have struggled to make his dream a reality.

Today in Ankara, the roads have been ripped up to install a metro system, and the streets which in the 1970s could still accommodate a horse and cart, are jammed with cars. Despite this, in part thanks to the efforts of the city's dynamic young mayor, Murat Karayalcin, the smog and filthy air have disappeared along with the horses and carts.

Karayalcin has just been elected leader of the Turkish Social Democratic Party and thus enters the government as deputy prime minister under Tansu Ciller, the only woman prime minister in the Muslim world. Her election earlier this year caused panic among the black and grey moustaches of Turkey's ruling elite but is, in itself, an example of the new politics—foreign as well as domestic—being hammered out in this old, sophisticated state.

Nato's outpost garrison state has found itself in the vortex of post-communist crises

In foreign affairs, the end of the cold war has caught Turkey on the hop. Nato's outpost garrison state has suddenly found itself in the vortex of post-communist crises. Its proclaimed policy goal of the 1980s was to become, bit by bit, part of Europe, with membership of the European Community as the ultimate end. Just as the entry into the EC of Spain, Portugal and Greece marked the decisive rejection of military rule in these countries, so the capitalist modernisers of Turkey saw Brussels as the means of lifting the military incubus off the back of Turkish civil society.

But 1989 changed all that. New candidates from the Christian east of Europe emerged as EC applicants, and Turkey lost its place in the queue. Then, within two years, the Soviet Union disintegrated—and the republics of central Asia (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazahkistan) emerged. Many speak a form of Turkish, and the prospect of creating a new "Turkic Arc" from the Chinese border to the Mediterranean grabbed hold of Turkish foreign policymakers' fervent imaginations. The focus of Turkey's foreign policy has shifted inexorably to the east.

Meanwhile, in 1990, during the crisis that followed Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, Turkey broke with its age-old tradition of neutrality in Middle East politics and sided decisively with the west against Saddam Hussein. Turkey's reward was to see a Kurdish enclave created on its south-eastern flank and the Kurdish question become a world issue. As with Northern Ireland, that other unsolved ethnic-religious problem on the fringe of Europe, the Kurdish question cannot be solved by military-security methods, but is too dangerous to be discussed politically.

Like the IRA, the main Kurdish guerrilla group, the PKK, kills unarmed or innocent people, including Kurds, to exert discipline. Like the IRA, the PKK is neither democratic nor representative of the whole community it claims to represent. There are of course crucial differences, not least of scale: the Turkish generals talk of suppressing "terrorism", but the reality is that of a civil insurrection with battalion-sized attacks on Turkish army outposts, in which scores get killed on both sides, and army reprisals against Kurdish villages identified as harbouring guerrillas.

Nevertheless, the ten million Kurds living in Turkey are not denied civil rights: they have a large block in parliament in Ankara, as well as a newspaper, *Ozgur Gundem* (although its journalists have been killed by Turkish death squads). And in this sense, too, Turkey has changed. Fifteen years ago, Kurds were called "mountain Turks", and Kurdish was banned.

Could the process go further? The Arafat-Rabin accord is also sending its shock-waves through Turkish politics. If the Israelis and the PLO can sign a deal, what stops Ankara and the Kurds?

The answer, brilliantly described in the latest Helsinki Citizens Assembly report on Turkey, is the central place of the Turkish military in Turkish life. The Kurdish insurrection provides the Turkish military machine with its *raison d'être*. With the world's largest army outside China and the US, the generals still dictate too much of Turkish politics. As Islamic fundamentalists grow in number and presence, the army reclaims its presence as the upholder of Turkish secularism.

In the 1970s, many young Turkish Marxists saw socialism as the answer. They still bear the scars of torture and imprisonment as witness to their idealism and to the cruelty of the military. Today, wiser and greyer, many of them believe that the path to a democratic demilitarised Turkey lies through socially accountable capitalist modernisation. Privatisation is destroying the army's hold on the economy. When the sons of colonels decide an MBA is a better route to wealth and prestige than running torture chambers in papa's footsteps, Turkey will finally achieve Attaturk's dream of secular modernity.

Denis MacShane

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Canada's prime minister, Kim Campbell (below), has remade the Tory Party's image, but her popularity is on the wane and the election at the end of this month may see her downfall, says **Ben Webb**

The Canadian club

She rose, as the saying goes, without a trace. Canada's new prime minister, Kim (Avril) Campbell, had served brief stints as Brian Mulroney's justice minister and minister of defence, having ejected successfully from the doomed Tebbitite government in British Columbia. Otherwise, she was new and almost unknown. She had a sharp tongue and no skeletons apart from a couple of divorces. She was female, and was said to speak French. She was under 50. Who better to rescue the (oxymoronic) Progressive Conservative Party?

And it did need rescuing. Mulroney had broken 65 years of Liberal hegemony but, by the end, was plumbing such depths of unpopularity that his cabinet colleagues hoped to fob him off on the United Nations before the top job was taken by Boutros Boutros-Ghali (of whom more later). Mulroney jumped before he could be shoved, and has since enjoyed no warm retrospectives.

Campbell has deployed all the smoke and mirrors in Ottawa to remake the ruling party's image, renaming ministries, filleting the cabinet and combining just-plain-folks media opportunities with pundit-friendly candour and talk of blood, sweat and deficits. And it all seems to be working—up to a point.

Before Mulroney's departure, the Conservatives were struggling to keep their opinion-poll rating above the unemployment rate of 11 per cent. That has changed now: a poll in mid-September put them on 35 per cent, only two points behind the Liberals, with Campbell's personal score higher still. The Liberal leader, an old warhorse named Jean Chretien, is on the defensive, unpopular in Quebec for his record of vociferous anti-nationalism, and, ironically enough, more closely identified with failed government than is the obscure new prime minister.

So far, simple enough. The complications begin with the other horses in the race.

There are three. To begin on the left: the New Democratic Party, which reached a high-water mark only two years ago with a string of provincial victories, has sunk to the shallows—largely because of those victories. The first-ever NDP government in Ontario, the largest province, is dragging along the bottom in popularity after imposing an austerity regime, with cutbacks and wage freezes. Organised labour is fed up, and voters have drawn their own conclusions.

It is the federal NDP that is paying the price. From around 20 per cent of the vote and 43 seats in the 295-member House of Commons in the 1988 election, the party has sunk to 8 per cent in the polls and will be hard put to hang on to its strongholds this time. To add to the New Democrats' woes, their leader, Audrey McLaughlin, has proved a somewhat less than compelling figure.

The NDP has even fallen behind the right-wing populists of western Canada's Reform Party. The "Reformers" are a threat to the Conservatives and the New Democrats, though they are probably past their peak, having misunderstood the subtle texture of Canadian bigotry. Bashing Quebec, homosexuals, bilingualism, Asian immigration, abortion, socialism, unions, and so on goes down a treat with many westerners, but only in the right proportions and properly stirred. Reform activists rather over-egged the pud-

Sportsphoto

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ding at a certain point, and started smelling like something altogether nastier than originally intended. The party leader, Preston Manning, has since had to back-pedal hard to stay respectable. Even now, the Reformers register 10 per cent in the polls nationally, which translates into a third of the vote in the west and, quite likely, a swathe of seats in the four westernmost provinces.

The final party in the race is likely to be the biggest story once the smoke and mirrors have settled. The Bloc Quebecois is a centre-right, anti-federalist party formed three years ago by the man who had been Mulroney's lieutenant in Quebec. Lucien Bouchard quit the Mulroney government, the Conservative Party and Canadian federalism *tout entier*, when a constitutional deal that would have recognised Quebec as a "distinct society" (the Meech Lake Agreement) was rejected by the English-Canadian provinces. Bouchard is aggressive, canny and very popular, and his Bloc is leading the polls in Quebec, the second most-populous province. If he holds on to the 40 per cent of Quebec votes the polls are giving him, he could take 40 or 50 seats, and not only hold the balance of power, but place a very large question-mark over Canada's future.

She offered to debate in French on live TV, but reporters had to ask her to repeat the offer in English

Unlike the Parti Quebecois in provincial politics, the Bloc keeps its nationalist luggage light. Is it *indépendantiste*, *souverainiste* or simply out to get the most for Quebec? "Not telling" would seem to be the answer. The BQ intends to act as a lobby for Quebec; the federal government will have to deliver, on pain of a parliamentary walkout that would leave the Canadian federation a husk.

How long could that go on? Quebec has stayed at the centre of Canadian politics for more than 100 years by being on the winning side—or rather, by voting in such a way that it has been nearly impossible to be the winning side without it. The Quebecois have enjoyed the role of kingmakers, and played it for all it was worth. But they have usually dignified the exercise with professions of faith in confederation. Now, the Bloc proposes to make it a strict business transaction. Will English Canada wear that for another 100 years? Likely not, but no worry to the Bloc: heads they stay in Canada and win, tails they leave Canada and win.

All that, however, is for after the election. The question until then is whether Campbell's bubble can be kept from bursting until 25 October, as Mr Major's was until 9 April 1992. Already there are some worrying signs for her image-makers.

A small dent to the PM's coachwork came with her vacillations over an armed forces helicopter contract, which belied her reputation for decisiveness.

Somewhat more important is the suspicion that her nerve greatly exceeds her credentials. To Campbell there now seems to be rather less than meets the eye. The "fast-tracking" academic described in her leadership campaign bumpf seems to have published precisely one scholarly article in her teaching career. The ostensible Russian speaker was unable to muster even a "Privyat, Boris" when she met the Russian president. The problem is not skeletons, but empty closets.

Worse, it is now suspected that Campbell Can't Really Speak French After All, which is where Boutros Boutros-Ghali comes back in. On 22 August, the UN Secretary-General, an Egyptian, had to rescue her from French-language reporters when she failed to grasp a question. On the rebound, Campbell volunteered to debate Lucien Bouchard *en français* on live television. Unfortunately, the reporters had to ask her to repeat the offer in English as they were not sure they had got it straight. Campbell subsequently chickened out of the debate on a flimsy excuse.

None of this will help the Tories in Quebec, but then, Quebec and English Canada have been slowly moving into separate bedrooms anyway. In this campaign, the Tories will be content to scrape together a majority in English Canada and top it up with a rump of Quebec members; failing that, just remaining the largest party will put them in a strong position for an eventual run-off election.

Campbell has engaged the best spin doctors in the land, and has settled on a rhetorical line. A Vancouver investor who keeps an amused eye on federal politics observed: "She is talking deficits, law and order, tough measures for tough times. The fact that she will never be mistaken for a warm and caring person actually helps.

"The strong-medicine message went down very well in British Columbia in the 1980s—this is a slightly guilty and puritanical country, and Canadians like to be punished. I suspect it will work nationally, especially if the Liberals can be portrayed as tax-and-spend prodigals."

Against the Tories' austerity, the Liberals are proposing public-works spending, which they say will reduce unemployment *and* the federal deficit. The New Democrats want social programmes to do the same thing.

"I don't think the Liberals and the NDP can sell it. However rich in irony it might be, Campbell is running against big government and against the politicians. She's tapping a mood that's fearful, nervous, conservative, even cynical. The others are offering solutions, and solutions are suspect. Campbell says: 'Sure, there'll be mass unemployment for years to come. Tough luck, but that's the way it is.' The pundits love it, and I think the voters will be persuaded, because for God's sake it's *true*, and people know it."

Much, however, will depend on electoral arithmetic. With two powerful regional parties queering the pitch in half the country, votes and seats may be in more than their usual disproportion. Left-wing veteran James Laxer says: "One of Britain's unhappier gifts to our country was the first-past-the-post electoral system. It does not suit Canada, and even less now. Which is why you would not catch me making any predictions."

INFLUENCES

MICHAEL MOORCOCK
Novelist

What books and authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?
The Martyrdom of Man by Winwood Reade, *Outline of History* by H G Wells (read as a boy), and Kropotkin's humane, sane, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (read as an adult).

Name one film, one book, one play, and one song or piece of music that you would most like everyone to see, read or hear.
Film: *Les Enfants du Paradis.*
Book: George Meredith's *The Amazing Marriage* (1895)—a first-rate novel, no longer in print.
Play: My wife Linda and I see a lot of memorable stuff, often unrecorded, wonderfully performed, often at smaller theatres and at our local, The Lyric in Hammersmith. Visit your local theatre while it's still there.
Poem: Yeats' "The Municipal Art Gallery Revisited".
Music: Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*, conducted by Pierre Boulez (not Simon Rattle!).
Song: "Inta al Hob" by the great Egyptian singer Oum Kal Tsoum.

In the early stages of your life, which figures stand out as an important influence on you?
Ernst Jellinek, a follower of Rudolf Steiner, who courageously went in and out of Nazi Europe getting Jews and others to safety. My guardian.

What event during your lifetime has had the greatest effect on your political beliefs?
The postwar Labour victory and the public idealism of the time.

Which political figure—living or dead—do you most admire?
Andrea Dworkin.

If you could visit any time in history for 24 hours, which would you choose?
The liberation of Auschwitz.

What do you consider the greatest threat at present to individual freedom and liberty?
Machismo, as exemplified in Bosnia, Moss Side, LA and Whitehall. I wouldn't dignify it as paternalism, would you?

On important matters, whose opinion—other than your own—do you trust most?
My wife Linda is almost always right. Sometimes I remember that and save myself time.

Who is the greatest prime minister we never had?
Mary Wollstonecraft.

If you could pass one law, what would it be?
After scrapping all laws limiting free speech, empower the weak against the strong with the legal right to challenge speech only when it becomes action (ie, that which materially threatens one's civil rights). We also need a constitution. The Canadian model seems the best so far.

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The war against democracy

The war against democracy, which replaced the cold war, had a notable success in Moscow this week. The promoters of the totalitarian "market" accelerated their assault on the lives of millions of ordinary people with the destruction of arguably the second freely elected parliament in 1,000 years of Russian history. Boris Yeltsin, the former Communist Party boss of Sverdlovsk, a position he used to oppose basic democratic rights, brought troops and tanks into the heart of his Russian "democracy" and allowed them to murder the elected representatives of the people. He could have been a Pinochet or a Somoza. John Major, for his part, said he admired Yeltsin's "restraint".

The Orwellian cover given these events in the west is astonishing even by the standards of previous propaganda models, such as the Gulf war, in which the slaughter of 200,000 people was despatched down the media's memory hole. It would be illuminating to see a comparative study of *Pravda*'s reporting of the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union and western reporting of Yeltsin's Russia. The similarities of systematic, ideological distortion would say much about the propaganda that we in the west often call news.

The BBC, ever conscious of its "impartiality", has led the propaganda barrage, constantly referring to Yeltsin's draconian methods as "reforms" and his parliamentary opponents as "hardliners" and "extremists". Boris the Good, on the other hand, is "the democrat whose patience finally snapped": such a generous description of a man whose troops had just burned the nation's parliament. (Imagine a BBC report from Berlin in 1933: "The Reichstag was burned down only after Herr Hitler's patience snapped".)

Since Yeltsin discovered "democracy" under Gorbachev, he has played to the western media gallery, whose reporting of his rise has helped to sustain him in power. With his American advisers and with American presidents propping him up, here, after 75 years, was a dictator who could deliver the Russian hinterland to foreign capital.

The necessary media mythology quickly followed. This summer, it has been Yeltsin versus the "hardline communist" parliament. In fact, the parliament was neither undemocratic, nor run by so-called hardliners. All the deputies were democratically elected in multi-candidate contests. Like Yeltsin himself, the majority were ex-communists: but most of them were, until recently, Yeltsin supporters. They elected him as the parliament's first chairman, passed the constitutional amendments that launched his presidency and stood by him during the abortive coup in 1991 when the White House and its parliament was the very symbol of Russian democracy.

"Far from defending democracy," wrote Renfrey Clarke, a Russian specialist not published in Britain, "Yeltsin's coup was launched because democratic institutions were beginning to work. The system of checks and balances was functioning as intended, with the legislature and the judiciary curbing the ability of the president to continue implementing policies that had failed and lost popular support. But instead of accepting that the other branches of government had the right to insist on a change of course, Yeltsin reponded as a committed totalitarian."

Renfrey Clarke writes for Australia's *Green Left Weekly*. Together with another freelance, Fred Weir of the *Morning Star*, and Jonathan Steele of the *Guardian*, his reports are honourable exceptions in a coverage that has served the expectations of western economic interests—just as the western press did before and after the 1917 revolution (with the honourable exception of Morgan Philips Price of the *Manchester Guardian*).

The largely untold truth in the west is that Yeltsin has returned Russia to military Stalinism, that *he* is the hardliner, and that the blood split this week is the direct result of ruthlessly applied "market reforms"—the same "reforms" that have caused so much suffering in Britain. "Yeltsin's policies have met opposition," wrote Clarke, "not because the Russian parliament is dominated by bloody-minded conservatives—an absurd claim—but because these policies are both contrary to the interests of most Russians and deeply flawed. Few economic programmes have been so ill suited, and few have failed so comprehensively."

Under Yeltsin, Russian industrial output has collapsed to 60 per cent of the level of January 1990. Price rises amount to 2,600 per cent. Real per capita incomes have dropped to third world proportions, placing most Russians, who once enjoyed a certain social security, on a par with Mexicans. This winter an estimated 60 million pensioners will be at risk, many of them from starvation. The fanaticism of Yeltsin's "shock therapy"—prescribed by Thatcherite advisers using descredited models —has been accompanied by a campaign against pluralism reminiscent of Thatcher.

In decree after decree, Yeltsin has undermined the new democratic institutions. In Decree No 1400, he suspended the Constitutional Court, Russia's third arm of government. When the chairman of the court, Valery Zorkin, challenged the legality of this, his telephone was cut off on the personal order of the president. During last April's referendum campaign, the national television service was highjacked by Yeltsin, and then refused all but token airtime to opposition candidates.

This week, he has banned a swathe of opposition parties and newspapers with hardly a word of protest from Washington and London. When the Sandinistas briefly suspended an opposition newspaper, funded by the CIA, the American press made this a *cause célèbre*. The Sandinistas were not approved by Washington; Yeltsin is. Adding to the Orwellian lexicon, the *New York Times* describes his thuggery as a "democratic coup". He has now drained the promised December elections of all democratic substance; the millions who suffer from and oppose his "reforms" will have no one to vote for. His crime, this week, is to have crossed a threshhold of violence beyond which lies an abyss well documented in Russian history.

What has happened in Russia is a vivid example of the war against democracy being waged all over the world in the name of the "global economy" and "development": the euphemisms for market imperialism. It has brought about what has been described as an "economic holocaust" in the poorest countries, which are 61 per cent more in debt that they were a decade ago and where, according to Unicef, half a million children die every year as a result of a peonage imposed by IMF "structural adjustment" programmes. This is seldom news in the west.

Of course, a Boris Yeltsin is not always available; and when democratically elected leaders dare to place the interests of their country before those of the rulers of the world, they become the target of economic warfare. This happened in Chile under Salvador Allende, in Jamaica during Michael Manley's first term and in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas ("We got rid of the communists in Nicaragua," boasted former President Carter recently.) When the Guatemalan human-rights activist Ramiro de Leon was elected president last June, he pledged to make his "first priority" the ending of the poverty that afflicts almost 90 per cent of his people. Within a month, the pressure from Washington was such that De Leon complied with IMF demands for an "open market" and economic austerity for the majority. Had he not complied, he said, his country would have been "destabilised".

Such honest nuggets are rare. Last January, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article entitled "Why Global Investors Bet on Autocrats, Not Democrats". Shortly afterwards, the head of the American bankers, Morgan Stanley and Company, told *Business Week*: "There is a saying on Wall Street that you buy when there is blood on the streets."

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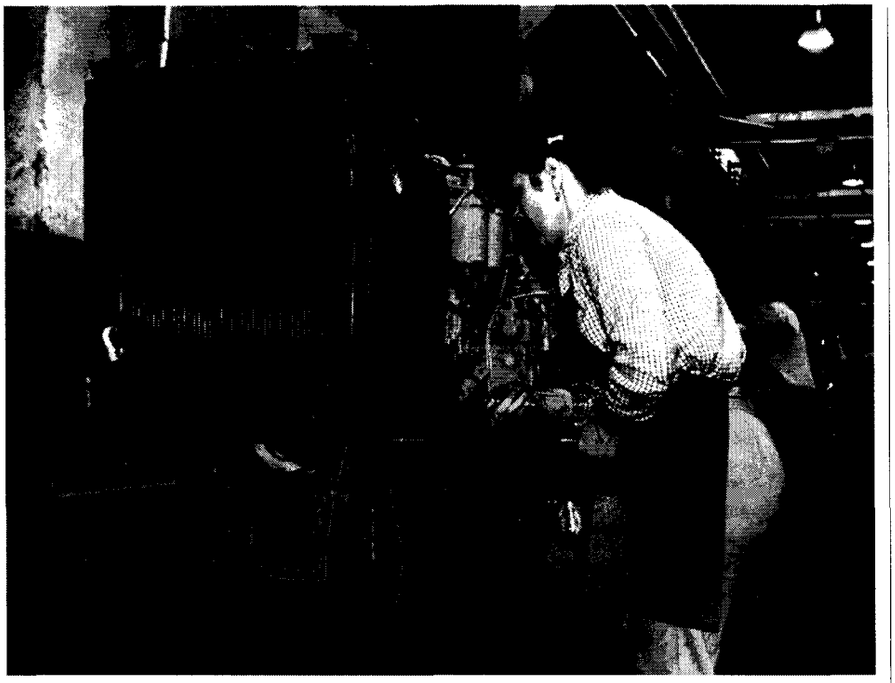

Russia's heavy industries, like this tractor plant, were sold on the cheap to the workers

Was Boris Yeltsin's coup against parliament simply camouflage for a botched economic policy, asks **Zhores Medvedev**

A capital coup

Boris Yeltsin this week won his battle with the recalcitrant Russian parliament after the army bombarded the White House into surrender. It was a victory hailed by western governments as clearing the way for continuing "market reform" of the Russian economy—and in the long run they might be proved right.

But the initial motive for Yeltsin's move against the legislature seems to have been very different. If anything, the Russian president advanced against parliament in the first place the better to *retreat* from a programme of market reforms that was going spectacularly wrong.

By the beginning of September, it had become clear that the world's biggest and fastest privatisation programme was not creating 1990s-style market capitalism. Thousands of Russian factories have indeed been turned into joint-stock companies, as the law allowed for. Yet in almost three-quarters of these enterprises, the majority shareholders (with 51 to 71 per cent of the shares) are company employees.

This is clearly not what was intended. The sort of corporate restructuring envisaged by the privatisation programme would have involved rationalisation, mass redundancies and recognisable profit, loss and dividend figures—more or less in that order. This happy sequence can hardly be expected when wary employees wield a veto. Profits will almost certainly be used to raise wages, not to pay dividends. Prices, rather than productivity levels, are likely to rise.

All this has come about because most company employees chose "closed subscription", one of the options set out in the privatisation programme: only 2 per cent of Russian enterprises, all close to bankruptcy or not yet in production, chose the "reconstruction" alternative, with at least 50 per cent of shares auctioned on the free market.

Employees chose "closed subscription" for a simple reason. In the 12 months between liberalisation of wages and prices (January 1992) and "people's privatisation" (January 1993), most prices rose by more than 2,500 per cent. Meanwhile, the nominal value of industrial enterprises remained frozen at the 1991 level, having been assessed on the basis of "historic cost". The result was shares at spectacularly knocked-down prices.

Dramatic anomalies ensued. Municipal property (housing, shops, taxis, restaurants, public baths, and so on) have been privatised on the basis of auctioning for cash, at market values. In contrast, privatisation of medium and large state enterprises has been restricted to voucher sales. (Each of Russia's 148.7 million citizens received vouchers worth 10,000 roubles, as "start-up capital".) When major industrial assets began to be sold for vouchers, prices remained at their very low book value: because more than 50 per cent of the shares could be purchased in advance by employees, no one expected them to show a return. There was thus little demand for their remaining shares. Moreover, since these shares could be bought only with vouchers, their market value did not emerge.

Auctions for municipal property started in July 1992, with bidders paying remarkable sums for everything from derelict shops to disused public baths. Reserve prices (based on the book cost) were often exceeded by 50 and 200 times; small shops were sold for more than large industrial concerns.

Some examples: Malysh, a small baby-food shop in St Petersburg, was sold at auction in March 1993 for 701 million roubles (about $500,000). The famous St Petersburg shipyard, Baltiisky Zavod, fetched 150 million (about $100,000). Uralmash, the largest machine-tool plant in Russia, which employs around 100,000, was put on voucher sale for 1.8 billion roubles, the equivalent of its wage bill for a fortnight.

The absurdity of the situation became glaringly obvious when large retail outlets came up for sale. Because they had a book value of more than one million roubles, they too were subject to voucher privatisation and "closed subscription". GUM, the famous department store facing the Kremlin on Red Square, went for 113,037 vouchers this summer—less than twice the price of the baby-food store.

By this point in the sell-offs, parliamentary criticism had become acute, and the government began to slow down privatisation.

The obvious contradiction between the aim of the privatisation programme and its results leaves one wondering who devised this bizarre strategy. This, however, requires a look backward—at the economic situation in Russia in 1989-91, and at the proposals put forward to deal with it.

Since the beginning of perestroika, incomes had been rising faster than productivity and output. After the miners' strike in 1989, wages went up considerably, giving rise not to the inflation that would result in a market economy, but to artificial shortages. Then, in 1990, when democratic elections brought new, often populist governments to power in almost all the Soviet republics, the central government lost control over wages—in the Russian Federation, the average monthly salary almost doubled in 1991. Bank savings reached an all-time record of 372 billion roubles, more than the country's budget, as people found they had more cash but nothing to spend it on. Three main prescriptions to remedy the situation emerged.

The most optimistic, even utopian, of the proposals was the Gorbachev-Yavlinsky "grand bargain" outlined by Gorbachev in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech and at the G7 meeting in London in July 1991. Essentially, it was a plea for a Marshall Plan for the Soviet Union.

A more realistic approach was advocated by pragmatic economists such as Leonid Abalkin and Abel Aganbegyan. They proposed the gradual removal of price subsidies, together with the selective, cash-based sale to the public of flats, small shops, machinery, small plots and so on. This would soak up the large surpluses of savings, improve services and at the same time stimulate economic growth.

The third plan was the simplest, and ideologically the most appealing to experts on the free market. The shock therapy methods that

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had been successfully tested in Poland would be applied to Russia. Price and income controls would be lifted forthwith; market forces would take care of the rest. The plan was backed by the International Monetary Fund and some of Yeltsin's western advisers. Its Russian advocates were a team of young economists led by Yegor Gaidar.

It seemed the easiest route to reform, and Yeltsin decided to adopt it, with modifications. It would be accompanied by comprehensive and rapid privatisation from the middle of 1992. The president would temporarily enjoy extraordinary powers, to enable him to make quick decisions.

Shock therapy began at the start of 1992. The "shock" was experienced more rapidly than in Poland, largely because the Russian economy was more dominated by monopolies. In the first four months, prices rose between five and ten times, swallowing up all the surplus money accumulated by the population. Even with tight control over money supply, an acute shortage of cash and a sharp drop in consumption, inflation did not slow down. A cash crisis struck consumers, producers and government alike. Collapse of the cash economy was prevented only by the central bank's printing arm, acting without government sanction.

It was against this background that the privatisation programme was launched. The government thought that, given the shortage of cash, privatisation vouchers would be treated seriously; their use would speed the transition to capitalism. As an encouragement, the vouchers were given a use-by date: the message printed on them claimed that they were valid only until 31 December 1993. But by September 1993 only 23.8 million vouchers had been used to purchase shares.

Something had to give. At the beginning of September 1993, Oleg Lobov, then first deputy prime minister responsible for the economy, presented a memorandum to Yeltsin recommending a halt to all voucher sales. He believed that privatisation should continue only after a realistic revaluation of the industrial infrastructure and other property. As parliamentary criticism of the unfairness and economic destructiveness of government privatisation practices increased, Yeltsin initially agreed with Lobov's arguments. Yet he was quickly persuaded that a radical change of course would embarrass his government. Unexpectedly, he sacked Lobov and reinstated Gaidar.

In the west, this was welcomed as a sign that market reform would be accelerated. In fact, it was probably a smokescreen for retreat. Gaidar is a convincing symbol of reform, behind whom a moratorium on privatisation might go unnoticed. Yeltsin did not, however, leave that to chance. He cleared the route for a U-turn by somewhat more dramatic means—dissolving parliament and silencing his critics. One is still left asking—who was responsible for the bizarre shock therapy plus privatisation scheme that is now unravelling? It is not that hard to work out; but nor is it sure that Russians or westerners will draw the obvious conclusion. After all, victors are not brought to account.

Zhores Medvedev's most recent book is "The Legacy of Chernobyl"

The government's return to a fiercely punitive response to crime, argues **Ian Taylor**, arises from rage against those who personify the failure of the free market

Driving the vermin off the streets

Twenty years ago, when we still had a welfare state, we didn't have a "law and order" problem. I don't mean by this that we didn't have a high rate of crime: there were more than two million offences known to the police in 1971, including over a million thefts.

Public opinion throughout the late sixties and early seventies was very much taken up with what was perceived to be a dramatic increase in offences of violence against the person, especially, it was believed, by the young. There were 47,000 such offences in total in 1971 (94,960 in 1979).

It is not that there wasn't any concern about crime in the early seventies. It is, rather, that the problems that did obtain were predominantly discussed in terms of a very different paradigm, or way of seeing, from the "law and order" rhetoric with which we have become so familiar during the 14-and-a-half years of this government.

The paradigm in place for thinking and talking about these problems was that of *treatment*: crime was understood as a personal or social pathology that was capable of correction by means of expert intervention. The criminal was capable of *rehabilitation*. Social workers and psychiatrists were seen to be in the vanguard of the treatment crusade, but there was a role for town planners, architects and other visionaries, particularly in the creation of neighbourhood housing that could elevate the human soul and also reproduce, it was still believed, a sense of community among people still being re-housed, 30 years after the war, from the slums.

It was also believed that these expert interventions in the life of the economically deprived could create a much greater equality of opportunity in the life-chances of all citizens. The consequence would be a happier, more efficient society exhibiting a broadening of the idea of citizenship in a system that was still widely understood to be heavily and fatefully divided by class.

The demise of this rehabilitative ideal in the seventies, was in many ways inseparable from the widespread loss of faith in the command economy model of economic progress and development itself—particularly the loss of faith in government-led programmes of social and economic progress. It is important, here, to remember that it was in the seventies that the widespread assumption of full employment—albeit in relatively mundane jobs—being guaranteed "for all" began to look increasingly problematic, at least in this country. In 1978, the numbers of young people leaving school exceeded the number of jobs available for the first time in the postwar period.

In public and political discussion, the ensuing loss of faith in government was bound up with a loss of faith in the capacity of experts or bureaucrats, working in or through the state, to deliver the kinds of service that delivered a public good to the people—for example, in respect of the design of public housing or the delivery of public services by local authority workers.

This loss of faith was given considerable encouragement in a range of social and economic polemics from ideologues of the right—many of them, like Daniel Moynihan and Irving Kristol in the US, social democrats whose faith had been shaken by continuing problems of order in the period of Social Reconstruction and the New Deal, and who were now arguing across a wide range of topics that the mistake was to believe that "the government could do anything".

In public discussion of crime and the practical business of crime prevention, one of the key interventions from the right came in a widely publicised paper by Robert Martinson, originally published in the conservative journal *The Public Interest* in 1974. This paper (under the title "What Works?") presented itself as an objective evaluation of the varieties of treatment then available within the criminal justice system, across the range from wholesale incarceration to individually targeted forms of therapy.

His depressing conclusion—widely taken up across the conservative press in the US, and then assimilated as a penological refrain in the political class in that country and elsewhere—was that "nothing works"; that sentences of the courts are more or less interchangeable; that governmental policies emphasising treatment or incarceration seem to have no discernible effect on the rate at which individuals re-offend; and that the whole postwar project of crime reduction through the rehabilitation of offenders had encountered an end-point.

Martinson's paper was extraordinarily influential. At the same time, the conservative criminologist James Q Wilson (another refugee from postwar social reconstruction) forcefully argued in his *Thinking About Crime*, published in 1975, against the ability of government programmes, like the Johnson administration's Opportunity for Youth programme, to deliver lower crime rates. He re-focused the attention of a whole generation of American criminologists on issues of

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Anton Kazlauciunas

population migration, race, the demise of parental authority and the rise of a general problem of incivility. The *containment* of this incivility was the most that could be hoped for—in Wilson's view, by appropriate (and "authoritative") punishment, but, most importantly, by preventative policing and environmental design.

It was at this point that Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space*, published earlier, in 1972—an analysis of the effectiveness of architectural innovations, expecially around the perimeter of private housing spaces—began very quickly to gain favour as the starting-point for effective action in the struggle against crime. The consequence was an explosion of interest, throughout the eighties, in preventative policing and environmental design, in a project that became known as "situational crime prevention". Changes to the design and layout of residential areas, and later to other public buildings (including, most recently, car parks), have been at the forefront of a whole new project of crime-prevention, organised, both through local authorities and the Home Office (the Safer Cities initiative) and in multi-agency collaboration with the private sector (for example, in and around city centre or urban periphery shopping centres).

Almost unseen, even to practitioners, is that what had been viewed as the political and social project of *crime-reduction* or *crime-prevention* has been transformed into a multi-agency (public and private sector) business focused on the *management of the crime problem*, now primarily owned at the local level rather than at the level of national government. (It is one of the ironies that this particular dimension of the law and order policy of a free-market government should involve this particular form of corporatist partnership—albeit a corporatism that does not involve itself in any Keynesian interventions into the market place itself.)

All the while that this corporatist project of crime-management has been emerging and taking shape, the crime problem itself, particularly in England and Wales, has continued to escalate, both in respect of actual numbers of offences known to the police, and also in respect of the levels of public fear and anxiety that are reported in a large number of surveys and investigations. Official figures reported a total of more than 5,250,000 offences in 1991 (compared with 2,536,000 in 1979, an increase of 104 per cent over 12 years) and a rate of 10,403 offences per 100,000 population (compared with 5,139 per 100,000 in 1979).

So, far from the eighties witnessing a reduction in the incidence of crime, the main debates of the decade, especially in police circles, had to do, at best, with *a reduction in the rate of increase in crime*. The response of Home Office ministers to these developments, especially when new sets of statistics were released on the mushrooming levels of crime, was to take refuge either in some utopian reference to the yet-to-be-realised potential of multi-agency initiatives or, alternatively—a juicy irony—to make use of the scepticism of sixties liberal criminolgy in respect of the "meaning of the criminal statistics".

We were enjoined by various government ministers to understand that the increasing crime statistics might just as well be seen as a measure of the increasing effectiveness of the police and awareness of the public with respect to crime (resulting from the attention given to crime in the mass media), rather than measures of actually occurring levels of crime. But there was always the feeling that these liberal sensibilities were never very heartfelt in the Conservative government as a whole. (Not the least important factor here, perhaps, being the truth that the last time there was a decrease in the overall level of crime in England and Wales was the last two years of the Labour government of James Callaghan, 1976-77 and 1977-78.)

Recent reports of the change of emphasis now taking place within the Home Office, under the tutelage of Michael Howard, suggest that the patience of the Tories with a corporatist management of the crime problem is now wearing thin. Even before this week's Conservative Party conference, Howard had already spoken of the need for a more "austere" prison regime; the fear expressed by many close observers of penal policy is that, in combination with another speech along these lines at the Blackpool conference, this will push the prison population above its previous record of 51,000 (in September 1987). What the effect will be on reconviction rates—65 per cent of all young males offenders discharged from custody in 1986 (the last available figures)—is anyone's guess.

The new director of the Prison Service, ex-Granada TV chief executive Derek Lewis, seems ready to carry this message into the prisons, perhaps with some exemplary demonstration projects in the privatised sector of the system. According to a recent press leak regarding a speech that was then spiked within the Home Office itself, the new Home Office minister with responsibility for law and order, David Maclean, is an aficionado both of privatised security and vigilante action in the project of driving "vermin off the streets". There are unmistakeable signs of an intensified push in the Home Office, and in the wider government, to severe punishment and incarceration, whether in the old block

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prisons, the slick new privatised establishments on the Wolds, or prison ships on the River Thames.

It is important to see the emergence of this unambiguous emphasis on punishment and incarceration, as a clear admission that the "neo-corporatist" eighties project of crime prevention through multi-agency collaboration and architectural re-design isn't working. Robert Martinson's question has, in fact, come back to haunt this free-market, law-and-order government with a vengeance. And with a vengeance, we might suggest, this government now intends to wreak its anger and frustration on those who have spoilt the free-market picture.

There is more than a hint here, of the kind of blaming practice that Mary Douglas, the social anthropologist, suggests is always bound up with social and political exchanges. The economic policies that have been pursued by the Thatcher and Major governments quite clearly and fundamentally involved an essentially *utopian* commitment to the use of free-market economic policies to create the conditions in Britain for a new period of massive capital accumulation and economic modernisation, with what were believd to be universal benefits for all (especially through the then much-vaunted phenomenon of the "trickle down" of wealth).

Economic commentators from William Keegan through to the Cambridge School, have shown how this essentially theological belief in the free market required the suspension, by the true believers, of a series of uncomfortable truths (most notably, the truth about the relationship between 19th-century wealth creation in the Victorian period—the age of Empire—and the real living conditions of the poor, and the size of the population living in poverty).

Now that the return of this repressed truth about the effects of free-market policies is so impossible to ignore (for example, in homelessness and begging on the streets; at least one-fifth of the population living below the official level of poverty; mayhem on the dump estates, and escalating problems of drug abuse and retreatism among the residualised poor), the response of the true believers takes the form, not simply and only of blaming the victim (in the formal sense first identified in the sixties by liberal criminologists), but quite specifically the form of an angry and vengeful blaming of that section of the population for not having contributed to the success of the free-market economic experiment—indeed, for being one of the most visible signs of its failure.

It matters not, in this scenario, that many of the criminals in the underclass do exemplify, very well, many of the self-interested and entrepreneurial qualities that are also on offer, in other places, within the enterprise culture. Incivilities, in this perspective, are not a matter of the self-interested individualism that is at the core of the free-market experiment. They are instead constructed as a set of the personal failings of this new underclass—a population that has emerged, in this perspective, out of nowhere, as a slur on the utopian vision of the true believers.

It is at this point in the argument that some true believers and male free-marketeers, following the work of the American individualistic policy scholar, Charles Murray, turn to the question of the "decline of the family", and especially the role of the unmarried mother, in order to construct a cultural account of the growth of poverty and incivility among the poor.

What is stunning about the call for punishment, austerity and the repression of the dangerous classes is, of course, that it has all happened before—though the historical curiosity of the present Home Office leadership will almost certainly not extend that far.

In two classic and definitive studies, David Garland and Michael Ignatieff have outlined, in great detail, the struggle beween repression and reform in the early history of the English prison. They showed the *ineffectiveness* of the pillory, the crank, solitary confinement and many other forms of physical and psychological punsihment, either on the prisoners themselves, or on crime rates.

The reform of the austere regimes of the late 18th century and early 19th century—and the introduction by John Howard (no relation) of new forms of discipline in prison, based on Enlightenment and classical principles of individual choice and reform—has been seen by some scholars as responsible for the reduction in crime in the mid-century.

But Michael Ignatieff—attentive to the troughs and cycles of a capitalist economy and, in particular, the end of the "hungry forties", the rise of Chartism and of the early labour movement—concludes that "the general decline of crime rates after 1855 in England . . . owed little or nothing to the consolidation of the penitentiary system, and much more to the real rise of wages among the working class".

A real rise in wages among that part of the population we used to call the working class is certainly not on offer in 1993 in any western capitalist society. But the *starting point* of any serious programme for the reduction of levels of interpersonal and property crime (including those interesting new initiatives around the ideas of "shaming" and "reintegration" of the offender and community reorganisation, based on Maori tradition and currently being mobilised by the Australian progressive criminologist, John Braithwaite, and the American feminist, Kathleen Daly) must now be seen as an attack on the escalating levels of inequality that have characterised the free-market experiment of the Thatcher and Major governments.

The alternative spectre—of a vengeful government intent of acting out its disdain for those elements of the population that did not take up the challenge of the enterprise culture—at least in a legitimate fashion—or who were not grateful for the benefits that were, momentarily (in the mid to late eighties), "trickling down"—is not only objectionable for its heartlessness. Indeed, historical evidence and contemporary experience alike quite unambiguously suggest that "it doesn't work".

Ian Taylor is professor of sociology at the University of Salford, and a member of the Economic and Social Research Council's programme panel on "Crime, Insecurity and Social Order"

The Right To Silence

They asked about their speeches,
They quizzed the party lags,
And the leader-writing leeches
Answered, "You could use some gags."

They begged for witty banter
On economy, on jobs,
And a weary backroom ranter
Rose and Sellotaped their gobs.

When they popped up to the podium,
Or took the centre stage,
They evaded any odium
With a mint, unprinted page.

When producers met their deadlines,
Which is what producers do,
They took soundbites for their headlines
But found nothing there to chew.

Cried the crowd, "It will excite us
To hear brand new plans revealed!"
—Their leader shook like Vitus,
But his lips and teeth were sealed.

They remained as dumb as doo-doo
By decree of Doctor Spin
And his mumbo-jumbo voodoo:
They were innocent of sin.

But their tacky tic-tac tactics
And their use of semaphore
And their verbal prophylactics
Came unstuck. They'd changed the law!

For their canny cakehole closure,
And the shutting of each trap,
Was accounted clear exposure
That their evidence was crap.

And although they held their breath in
Till their faces grew true blue,
The verdict passed was Death, in
Just a year, or maybe two.

Civil rights had been eroded,
And reduced to a charade,
But the Tories were exploded
By their foolish own petard.

Bill Greenwell

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As three key junior ministers gave evidence to the Scott Inquiry, the official fog thickened. **Patrick Fitzgerald** reports

Three blind mice

At times during the past fortnight, Lord Justice Scott has looked as if he wished he were back on holiday. Taking a break from the convolutions of his inquiry into the sale of defence equipment to Iraq, he went to Ireland and wrote the first part of his report. At the restart, Scott and chief counsel Presiley Baxendale QC called in two of the senior Foreign Office officials who ran Britain's Middle East policy during the late 1980s. Both are graduates of Shemlan, the FO's former Arabic studies school in Lebanon. The first was the Honourable David Alwyn Gore-Booth, Eton and Christ Church, now British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and formerly the assistant under-secretary in charge of the Middle East. In the Foreign Office hierarchy, the only upward step for Gore-Booth is the head of the diplomatic service, a post once held by his father. The second, in every sense of the word, was John Robertson "Rob" Young, now at the Paris embassy, but formerly head of the Middle East Department between 1987 and 1989 and thus point man for UK-Iraqi relations during that period.

Gore-Booth had a particularly difficult time, losing his temper in the face of persistent chipping from Baxendale. He also referred to an intriguing intelligence dispute, in which GCHQ was unable to corroborate and in fact contradicted claims by MI6 and the Defence Intelligence Staff that British exports were being used to build up the Iraqi arms industry. This, according to Gore-Booth, made it more difficult for the Foreign Office to resist DTI pressure (especially from Alan Clark) to grant export licences.

After the civil servants, the following week brought in the trio of junior ministers in nominal day-to-day control of Middle East policy between October 1985 and November 1990: Timothy Renton, David Mellor and William Waldegrave. The evidence of these three was eagerly awaited for their accounts of the history of the guidelines governing defence sales to Iraq in the late 1980s, originally promulgated by Sir Geoffrey Howe in 1985, and the political environment in which they were taken. Waldegrave in particular was felt to have a great deal to answer.

The first of this trio to appear, Timothy Renton, gave evidence on 20 September. In a measured and smooth performance, Renton was caused difficulty only by the matter of a consignment of the chemical hydrogen fluoride (HF) that was sold to Egypt in the autumn of 1986. This is a principal component of the nerve gas Sarin, which was what the Iraqis used it for.

This touched on an issue of potentially huge embarrassment to the government: UK support for Iraq's chemical weapons programme. The evidence is, fortunately for ministers and Whitehall, fairly sketchy. As it is, at least one batch of the Matrix-Churchill machine tools sold to the Chilean arms manufacturer Industrias Cardoen in 1989 was shipped on to an Iraqi chemical weapons plant. Internal memoranda from the Export Credit Guarantee Department show that the government was not only aware of this but also agreed to provide insurance cover against the possibility of the Iraqis defaulting on payment (which they did).

The ECGD's information clearly derived from intelligence sources. Similarly, in 1986, according to Renton, Mossad tipped off MI6 that at least one hydrogen fluoride order for Egypt had been transshipped directly to Iraq. MI6 told Downing Street, and Charles Powell, Thatcher's chief foreign affairs adviser, minuted Foreign Office ministers to that effect. A few months later, in May, HF was added to a list of controlled exports. So when a Rio Tinto Zinc subsidiary based in Bristol sought a licence to export 26 tons of HF to Egypt in September 1986, with the backing of the ministries of Trade and Defence, Renton registered his objection.

It didn't last long. Within weeks Renton backed down, for which he gave several reasons. First, Mossad refused to provide "collateral" evidence of their suspicions regarding the first shipment. Second, HF was "widely traded elsewhere" — a familiar argument to justify arms dealing — besides which RTZ was "a reputable company". Third, a forthcoming visit by Renton to Egypt might have been awkward had the purchase, made by an Egyptian government-owned corporation, been blocked.

These arguments were deployed, in slightly different forms, by Mellor and Waldegrave. Mellor, smug and fleshy, told the inquiry that in 1988 Safa al-Habobi, a kingpin of Baghdad's arms procurement and "highly influential" in the Iraqi regime, was not refused entry to Britain for fear of offending the Iraqis, who "were amazingly prickly and touchy about it". At the time, Habobi was a director of the Technology Development Group, owner of Matrix-Churchill after mid-1988. Mellor evidently expected MI5 to keep an eye on Habobi during his sojourn in this country.

Like most ministers, Mellor made use of intelligence to reinforce his cover when necessary while denouncing it when its product threatened to undermine him. Intelligence reports "weren't the word of God", consistently lacked any "earth-shattering news" and were delivered "in a crummy, hard-to-read fax". Yet in nearly 12 hours of meetings in Baghdad with senior Iraqi officials in early 1988, including two hours with Saddam, Mellor claims he did not once raise the issue of arms sales "because it might have compromised intelligence sources". Since, as he claimed, he had not seen intelligence reports confirming that machine tool exports he himself had authorised were destined for Iraqi munitions factories, what can he have known about these "sources" — mainly businessmen such as Paul Henderson and Mark Gutteridge from Matrix-Churchill, and Paul Grecian from Ordtech?

Paul Henderson arrived at the Scott hearings the day after Mellor to hear Waldegrave. His just released autobiography, An Unlikely Spy, is sadly mistitled: anyone who traded with the Soviet bloc during the cold war, as Henderson did before becoming involved with the Iraqis, was guaranteed a visit from MI6.

Henderson watched, his trademark wry smile barely suppressed, as Waldegrave gave a spectacularly convoluted performance over the next day and a half. The central questions he faced were those at the heart of the inquiry: were the guidelines governing the export of defence equipment to Iraq changed during his ten-ure as a Foreign Office minister; if so, why was parliament not told?

Lord Justice Scott seemed unconvinced that it was all "an understandable misunderstanding"

The gist of Waldegrave's various replies was as follows: yes, new, less restrictive guidelines were introduced on a trial basis at the end of December 1988, "as a working tool", but they were never formally approved by Geoffrey Howe, the foreign secretary. No change in the guidelines could occur without both Howe's and Thatcher's endorsement: this was not obtained, therefore there was no change in the guidelines, and therefore no need to say anything to parliament. Unfortunately, the civil servants in the various departments (FCO, MOD, DTI, ECGD) concerned with Iraqi trade confused the old and new versions, and after December 1988 behaved "as if there had been a *de facto* change in the guidelines". The two versions seemed to have become fused in the minds of the hapless officials, he contended. It was all "an understandable misunderstanding".

Waldegrave demands a measure of admiration for his guts in trying to get away with this specious drivel. Scott, peering over his half-moons, seemed unconvinced, and confessed to being kept awake at night by aspects of this inquiry. Sleepless nights await.

Universal Pictorial Press

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Playing down the differences

On the train to Blackpool, I found myself sitting opposite three ladies from Surbiton, who were heading for the Conservative Party conference. A producer and a cameraman from *Channel Four News* were sweeping through the aisles looking for interview material. They came to a halt by our seats, and asked, "What message would you like to give the party this week?"

The Surbiton ladies replied as one, "We want the party to listen to us." Nobody was paying them any attention, they moaned, especially not ministers and Conservative Central Office.

So what was their message, the producer probed? What exactly did they want the politicians to listen to?

Ah, well, it was hard to say. They became flustered, and then fell silent. Were they worried about VAT on fuel, the producer persisted? No, they thought it was probably the right thing in the circumstances. Perhaps, then, they were bothered about Europe? Not exactly, no. They were no great admirers of the Maastricht treaty, but they considered that that debate was over now. In fact, after contemplating matters for a little while longer, they could not think of a single area of government policy that they disagreed with. After the television crew had left, they shook their heads sadly and said, "It's all got up by the press anyway."

Any politician listening to them would be none the wiser about what should be done. Nevertheless, the Surbiton ladies did let slip, in their muddle and confusion, that they wanted the party "to regain a sense of purpose and direction". It was leadership they were after, not a listening Prime Minister. They wanted to be told what they wanted.

I thought of them again when I entered the conference hall. There, in front of me, was this huge, some would say fascistic, blue stage backdrop, with Big Brother television panels at either end and the Union Jack in the middle. In Margaret Thatcher's day, her presence alone was enough to turn the Conference conference into a Nuremberg rally. This year, the organisers were leaving nothing to chance.

We got the message all right, but what exactly was it? It was about "Building for the Recovery", because it said so in big letters. But, in small letters on the blue Velcro, was a multitude of other messages. "Putting Britain First. Spreading Wealth Wider. Action on Crime. Raising Standards." The Labour Party used to dither about what to highlight at its party conferences because of the gaping absence of a "big idea". This time, it was the Conservatives who did not know what to think.

The absence of leadership was a precondition for the phoney outbreak of unity at the beginning of the week. Ministers were under orders to resuscitate "the golden age that never was", by citing Margaret Thatcher and John Major approvingly in the same breath. Party chairman Sir Norman Fowler led the way: "For years I was called a 'Thatcherite'. And, let me say, I wear both these labels with pride." Thatcher was supposed to be suitable for the 1980s and Major for the 1990s, but, in all other respects, the differences between them were to be minimalised.

Norman Tebbit played the game at a fringe meeting where he made out that John Major's vision of Europe, as outlined in the *Economist*, was different only in minor details from his own. Douglas Hurd went along with the charade by scarcely mentioning Europe at all in his conference speech. On the first day, the speakers from the floor were more than usually anodyne, and the motions so broad that one woman quipped about how the foreign-affairs debate was wide-ranging enough to include chemical castration for rapists.

People appeared jaded, as if they lacked the energy to tear each other apart, even as the conference started

People appeared jaded, as if they lacked the energy to tear each other apart, even though the conference had only just started. There was no particular bond between them. All they had in common was a sense of battle fatigue and disappointment with the government.

In an article in *Reformer*, the magazine of the left-leaning Tory Reform Group, David Hunt, the Employment Secretary, identified the problem. It might have been written with the Surbiton three in mind, for the article was called "Listening and Leading".

"In particular, we need to pause occasionally, to reassure others—and perhaps ourselves—of the moral and philosophical basis of what we are doing," he wrote. "That is what is meant by listening and leading. It's all very well leading from the front, but we have to ensure that the army has sufficient confidence in where we are heading—or else the generals might find themselves without any foot soldiers."

In the absence of Chris Patten, Hunt has been setting himself up as the party's left-of-centre philospher. Like Patten, he describes himself as a Christian democrat, and yet is also grudgingly admired by the right for playing the "hard man" on occasion. He is not one for being "gobsmacked" or telling "porky pies", but he did fight Labour bare-knuckled in the debate on party funding after Asil Nadir's flight.

At the fringe meeting of the Tory Reform Group, however, Hunt was disappointing. Here was yet another minister pretending that there was no difference in the Conservative Party between left, right and centre. So, although he owned up to his Christian democrat leanings, he described them in such a way that the No Turning Back Group could have signed up for them. His version of the social-market economy turned out to be one in which the free market was rampant. The gains from letting it rip would then help to pay for welfare for its casualties.

It was the non-Thatcherite politicians who made most of the concessions this week. The right went on satisfying its atavistic instincts (while refraining from publicly criticisng Major). On the conference fringe, Michael Howard tried to boost his leadership prospects by borrowing the arguments of John Redwood and Peter Lilley about motherhood and the family. In the old days, stigmatising single mothers encouraged them to give up their children for adoption—and it was probably in the best interests of both of them, he moralised.

Howard's only chance of becoming Prime Minister is as the stop-Kenneth Clarke candidate. Since the right is temporarily propping up Major while waiting for Michael Portillo to fulfil that role later, Howard does not look like making it.

But he has been the short-term beneficiary of the fragile truce between left and right. He has been encouraged to hold forth on law and order as a means of persuading the party faithful that the politicians really are listening and responding to their concerns. Later, when the crime rate goes on rising, he will be left to take the rap.

The cessation of hostilities cannot last, and not just because the leaked Thatcher memoirs are about to be published in full. The whole conference has taken place in her shadow, because, in the vacuum of leadership since her departure, the dividing line in the Tory Party is not "What do you think of Major?"—since nobody cares much for him—but "What do you think of her?" Ministers have tried to skirt around this, but they won't get away with it.

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SIDELINERS

From John Prescott's famous cascade of words last week, a few jumped out. He spoke of "social democrats and socialists" both backing Omov. A working-class socialist, he clearly wanted to distinguish his own support from that of a long line of social democrats stretching back to David Owen, who urged Omov on the 1981 Wembley conference only days before co-founding the Council for Social Democracy.

Prescott reassured those activists who want to avoid union bureaucrats pre-determining parliamentary candidates without losing Labour's working-class roots. Prescott's Hull East constituency has recruited individual unionists galore—perhaps equalled only by Tony Blair in Sedgefield, where membership has doubled from 600 to 1,200.

Labour's future expansion through Omov depends on whether recruiting is done Prescott-style or Blair-style. Blair's angle of vision is clear. If shadow cabinet members posed Smith's "Mirror, mirror" question, but changed the punchline to "the most social democratic of us all?", the smilingly eager, boyishly handsome face of Tony Blair would certainly flash up.

Blair has never hidden his reformism. He wants Labour to embrace "radical, left-of-centre progressivism". Voters "need to be sure . . . that if they vote Labour, then they're getting a government that is going to improve their prosperity, increase their individual aspirations, but do it within a strong and fair community". He has helped scale down union power in the party.

This is not surprising, because there is nothing traditionally socialist in his background. Son of a Conservative law lecturer, he was born in Edinburgh in 1953 and went to the Scottish public school, Fettes. At St John's College, Oxford, he was more interested in revues and playing in a rock group than in student politics.

Intriguingly, he joined the Labour Party in 1975 in reaction against its "sectarian elements from the ultra-left"; he later aligned himself with Labour Solidarity. He talked his way into the chambers of top union lawyer "Derry" Irvine, now Labour's legal spokesperson in the Lords. Irvine, who already employed Blair's future wife, Cherie, daughter of actor Anthony Booth, recognised Blair's "remarkable ability to identify quickly the relevant facts, define the issues to which answers had to be found, and then come to an overall conclusion". Irvine encouraged Blair's ambitions.

Despite a disastrous performance at the 1982 Beaconsfield by-election, in 1983 Blair was chosen "miraculously" for safe Sedgefield. The closed short-list was reopened for him to oppose hard left ex-MPs Reg Race and Leslie Huckfield. His 1984 promotion to assistant Treasury spokesperson was hailed as the fastest since Owen's in 1968. Ever since, he has shown high intelligence, excessive charm, brilliant timing *and the caution that prevented him from* standing against Margaret Beckett, last time.

Andrew Roth

EDWARD PEARCE

Even those whose best friends are Tories find Tory conferences so much more boring than Labour ones

I'm not prejudiced. Some of my best friends are Conservatives. But, while it takes about three days of conference for me to become fairly browned-off with the Labour Party (and I left Torquay still mildly indulgent towards the Lib Dems), one can't sustain affection for the Conservatives much after mid-morning of the first day.

It isn't hard to say why. However ferocious the underlying quarrel—and that quarrel at the moment resembles a dozen Gillette blades in a bowl of shaving cream—the awful complacency of the Conservative Party shines through. So also does a mood of self-congratulation, laid in the conference hall like linoleum. It even extends to agriculture. The Minister of Agriculture is Gillian Shephard, essentially rather a nice lady, but she does so resemble Joyce Grenfell's Lumpy Latimer, the old girl at a school reunion talking through nervous giggles about her marriage to "a Mr Clinch".

Hearing Gillian Shephard, the only woman who can roll the letter D denouncing "the sand-dled brigad-de", I shall always think of her as Mrs Clinch.

The unthinking part of conference is sure that the right, nice people are in charge of our affairs

But for all the denunciations of green troublemakers and other intruders upon the world of agro-zip, agriculture was a quiet matter into which only limited partisan feeling can be invested. Conservative self-congratulation took over. But over all the burbling pleasantness, the coffee and biscuits, the old friends chatting in the concourse, atrocity hangs about this conference like murder in an Agatha Christie plot.

Those able to take in real politics, a significant minority, buzzed with the *Daily Mirror*'s scoop. The passages in Mrs Thatcher's leaked memoirs revealed reality. She had thought Major weak and feeble; she had lied for him. She had a soft spot for Ken Clarke (her solar plexus on the day). Mrs Thatcher seems to be at war, not just with Mr Major, but with the greater part of her immediate and peripheral acquaintance. The failure of other people to come up to Mrs Thatcher's own on-to-Berlin standards grieves her. Mrs Thatcher seems to have written the Confessions of a Failed Personnel Manager.

That is the mood. But mood and conference proceed on their parallel but hardly harmonious ways. The thinking part of the conference knows that Mr Major must make an exceptional speech, tough and resolute this side of a declaration of war (but not too far this side). It must be endearing and personally charming—things that he can do—but it must also make a public profile with supporters and voters outside, such that it vaults over what Mrs Thatcher used to call "the enemy within". Come to think of it, Margaret Thatcher *is* the enemy within!

Yet the unthinking part of conference is sure that the right, nice people are in charge of our affairs. Under the ever-united Conservatives, there will be "a better future for all our people". This sort of Conservative thinking comes in thin personalised metal strips.

As for the functioning conference, it hears from Mr MacGregor, amateur magician (and semi-professional Transport Minister) how privatisation of the railways will lead to lower prices and extended services. (Mrs Shephard overlooked in her agriculture speech the prospect of White Berkshires in formation flypast.)

The serious, non-niggling criticism of the transport debate epitomises so many Conservative conference debates. It was no debate at all. Trusty, filtered speakers arrived at the podium to congratulate the minister on his wise and exciting pursuit of a correct policy. No one would think, that second only to the imposition of VAT on domestic fuel, rail privatisation is annihilating the Conservatives' votes across the entire south of England.

There are serious critics within the Tory fold, like John Gray of Oxford, who are talking of a Conservative holding in the next parliament of 100 seats. They point to such measures as the headless Thatcherism, an unconsidered continuation of detested policies that alienate the party's natural support.

Finally, there was Sir Norman Fowler. Blazing through his rimless spectacles, the Lennox-Lewis of Smith Square, denouncing the French, John Prescott, the unions and unsound people everywhere. He looked angry enough to break a pencil in two across his knee: a feeble man simulating rage and barely making it to pique.

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Coup, what a scorcher. **Laurie Taylor** uncovers conspiracies, pacts, plots and a school for sandals, as he reminisces about the great office disputes he has known

Treasons to be cheerful

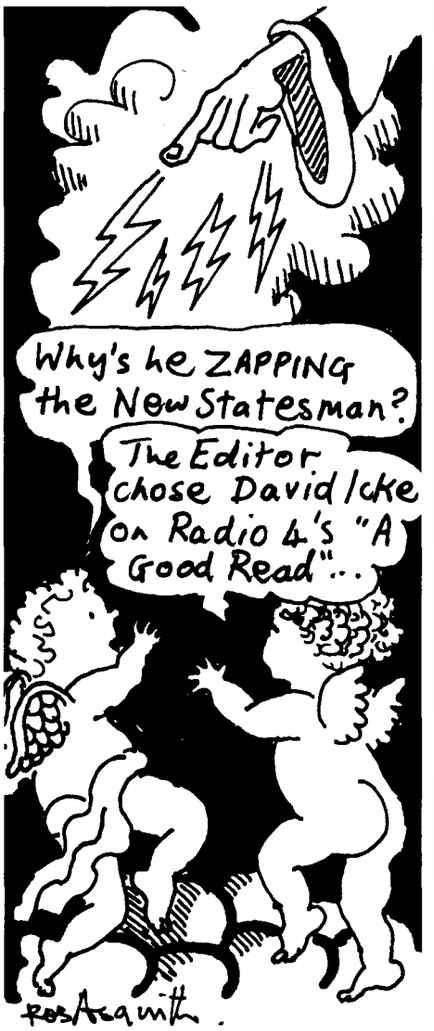
In much the same way that the only programme anyone has really wanted to see on BBC television in the past six months has been a two-hour special devoted to "What the staff really thinks of John Birt", so, I suspect, the only *NSS* article that would currently command complete attention would be a lengthy piece entitled: "The true story of how the *NSS* editorial team are lining up over the prospective near-takeover of the mag by ex-Tory, Mr Derek Coombs".

After a brief telephone conversation with an *NSS* staff member last Tuesday afternoon, I had high hopes that I might be the one to bring you that very story. It was all rather fortuitous. I simply rang to say that I'd appreciated the cartoon that had been used to illustrate my last column and to ask, rather indulgently, if there was any chance that I might purchase the original. But I'd barely stumbled halfway through my request when the woman at the other end of the line—let's call her staff member "X"—suddenly said, "You're lucky you're not here this week." "Things are difficult?" I ventured, suddenly aware that by requesting a portrait of myself in the very week that the *NSS* plunged into crisis, I was displaying all the sensitivity of a playwright badgering Mrs Lincoln for her views on the second act dénouement.

"*Difficult?* That's an understatement. The atmosphere is *horrible*." I made a few sympathetic noises, but couldn't help hoping that we'd soon move off these emotional generalities and get down to some hard office gossip. Presumably, there were two sides already forming in the dispute. What were the precise details? Was Sarah Baxter, for example, to be found in the same camp as Duncan Campbell? Who was solidly for and against Steve Platt? Were advertising and circulation already taking sides? What was Boyd Tonkin's attitude? (I fancied a certain literary world-weariness.) Had Ms de Meaner at last found common cause with Jaci Stephen? And could one assume that ex-Tribunite Paul Anderson was too much of a new boy to become involved or was he already exchanging late-night explanatory phone calls with Edward Pearce and Sean French?

"Are people taking sides at all?" I asked off-handedly. "It's not so much about sides," she said carefully, "more about lack of confidence." "In whom?" "I can't talk now," she said, "he's just come in."

All in all, it hardly seemed enough on which to base a comprehensive analysis, but I decided that I'd use the little gobbets of information I had to weasel even more news out of Steve himself. Something along the lines of, "Look here, Steve. I know there are some serious divisions within your staff over this whole Coombs business and that you yourself are probably getting quite a bit of stick. How much do you feel you're being asked to carry the can for a load of troubles not of your own making?" If that didn't have him opening up, then my diploma in Human Counselling from Brunel wasn't worth the mock parchment it was written on.



Ros Asquith

I waited until half-past two the following afternoon to make the call on the grounds that tension would probably be at its highest and mouths at their loosest after the various coalitions had rehearsed their attitudes over lunch. "May I speak to Steve Platt, please?" "Who?" "*Steve Platt.*" "I don't think he's here at the moment. What sort of thing does he do?" "He's the fucking editor," I said, as gently as I could.

It occurred to me there and then that a coup against Steve had already taken place and that the staff had been summarily instructed to airbrush out his previous editorial existence. But only the day after, I met a freelance journalist at the launch of the *Time Out Book of London Short Stories* who told me, in between munches of vol-au-vent that, as far as he knew, Steve was still very much in charge and, if anything, gaining support. Matters were, however, definitely "coming to a head".

I'm not greatly surprised at the inconclusive nature of the news I'm eventually able to bring about life inside the offices of today's *NSS*. I remember that I was equally in the dark over the great mid-eighties' crisis at *New Society*, which led to the removal or resignation of Paul Barker as editor. Even though I later learnt that I'd been enjoying a lamb pasanda with one of the key conspirators on the day before the crunch meeting, I still couldn't tell you who was on whose side or give any proper account of why Paul disappeared so suddenly from an office which, up until then, I'd thought he'd held with some distinction.

Neither was I exactly in the know in the great early eighties' crisis at *New Statesman* when Hugh Stephenson, against all the odds, somehow or other succeeded Bruce Page as editor. At the time I was living with the magazine's deputy editor, but even with her nightly briefings I was never quite able to keep track of the shifting allegiances, let alone decide upon the truth of the rumour that the decisive meeting had been bugged and relayed down the Great Turnstile corridors to the staff.

I suspect that these office battles are difficult for outsiders to follow closely because, although they're invariably conducted in terms of abstract principles, they quickly become vehicles for the expression of secret resentments that have built up year after claustrophobic year over such less high-minded matters as the literary editor's appalling choice of ties, the constant whiff of body odour whenever the circulation manager is in the room, and the editor's inability when seated to keep his left knee from bouncing up and down like a demented jackhammer.

Indeed, if my own inside experience of office battles is anything to go by (and I still recall with great pleasure a York sociology department dispute back in the seventies that even made the columns of the nationals), then what happens to the *NSS* in the next few weeks may have more to do with the number of people who can be persuaded that the editor's predilection for wearing socks with sandals does not necessarily mean that he's a bad person, than any hard news about Mr Derek Coombs. Meanwhile, of course, I'll be bringing you all the hard news about the situation as it breaks.

The editor wishes to make clear that, by popular request, he now no longer wears sandals—with or without socks

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One Over The 80s

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LETTERS

Antisocial family values

Yvonne Roberts ("Divorced from reality", 24 September) fails to underline strongly enough the impact that government "social" policy has had on family life. Research that I am conducting with colleagues at the University of Manchester, on the impact of the Child Support Act on lone-parent families, points to contradictions between the government's rhetorical support for "family values" and the actual effects of its policies.

To take just a few examples from our research, inadequate incomes contributed to the break-up of relationships in several cases. The continuing discrimination against women within the labour market and the benefits system, on the basis of their gender, was also reflected in their difficulties in finding good-quality childcare or appropriate training. This undermined their attempts to establish financial independence and security, either within the relationship or after it had ended.

For people who form new relationships after the ending of a first relationship, the arrival of the Child Support Agency appears to presage new financial pressures. The likely effect of the compulsory maintenance arrangements will be to redistribute poverty between "first" and "second", and thus reproduce many of the difficulties that originally contributed to the ending of the "first" family. For the children of all these families, the "family values" of this, and preceding, governments may come to be associated with insecurity, poverty, stress, ill-health and bad housing.

Gary Craig
School of Social and Professional Studies
University of Humberside

Poking fun at the revolution

I was reading Yvonne Roberts' article ("Divorced from reality", 24 September) with the required straight and sober face, when I came upon the phrase " . . . the sexual revolution, which bluntly meant that a poke was possible without a marriage proposal", and I burst out laughing.

George Cowley
Worcester

Recovering in comfort

Frank Field's suggestions for full employment ("Let's get to work", 24 September) are all very laudable, but they implicitly condemn three-quarters of the world's population to further misery and poverty. By switching aid to eastern Europe, people in the third world will suffer. This is already happening, as overseas development budgets are cut and aid is chanelled to the former Soviet Union. This will not help the poorest nations on earth.

I would have more sympathy with plans to fix Britain's economy if it was recognised that we are a *world* community, and that we have a responsibility to all peoples of the world. Rather than blithely isolating European or western economies for recovery, policy proposals should always include plans for a worldwide recovery. To this end, we should reject the current Gatt negotiations, which will not help the third world one iota. They will, instead, force these countries to open up their economies even further to highly subsidised western agriculture, so disrupting local efforts to be self-sufficient in food.

Gatt needs to be replaced with a Gast (General Agreement on Sustainable Trade), that allows countries to protect their economies, enabling them to diversify and build up local agriculture and industry. Only when this is recognised can we talk of recovery that will benefit everyone, and not just the comfortably-off.

Andrew Bennett
Headingley
Leeds

Let's get together

Being of charitable disposition, I will assume that before writing to *NSS*, my fellow Lambeth councillor Josh Arnold-Forster (Letters, 24 September) had not understood the winning boost Labour's canvass figures gave to the British National Party's campaign for the Millwall by-election. I believe that Labour environment spokesperson Jack Straw must have known this, but that's another story.

However, Councillor Arnold-Forster cannot be allowed to get away with his smears about the Liberal

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Democrats in Lambeth. Rebutting them is difficult, since his letter contained not one single specific instance or fact, just unsubstantiated assertions. So I want to suggest this: let us stop the war of words between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, nationally and locally, and consider how to deal with the twin problems of inadequate public housing and racial disadvantage in the inner cities.

We can surely agree that not a big enough share of the nation's resources is devoted to social housing and that municipal management of existing stock in places like Lambeth could be greatly improved, empty flats filled and low-priority illegal occupants evicted. We can agree that, historically, black and Asian people have had some of the worst housing and that things are improving through progressive allocation and rigorous monitoring.

Can we not also agree that there are real social benefits to be gained from keeping families together in the communities where they live; from better and cheaper care of the elderly by having their sons and daughters living in the neighbourhood; from less disruption to children's schooling when a family must move, having outgrown its one-bedroom flat; and from having friends nearby when older people need ground-floor or sheltered accommodation?

Michael Tuffrey
Leader, Liberal Democrats Group
Lambeth Council

THIS ENGLAND

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• The AA has produced its own *Atlas of Britain* showing the heights of 1,500 road and rail bridges. It says that in 1991-92, there were more than 700 incidents where lorries smashed into bridges. Legislation to be introduuced next year will make it illegal to drive under a bridge too low for the vehicle.—*Daily Telegraph* (T Drew)

• Perhaps firefighters could improve their productivity by moonlighting?—Letter in the *Guardian* (Sigrid Rabiger)

Street strife

"Does tomorrow belong to the BNP?" asks the article by Nyta Mann (24 September). The answer is no, but if you merely took her article as a guide, you would have to have severe doubts. It is clearly true that the conditions that existed in Millwall—bad housing, chronic unemployment and alienation from the political process—exist elsewhere. So the potential for the BNP to grow electorally exists as well.

But the BNP is a Nazi party, and its prime interest lies not in votes, but in control of the streets. Here, the BNP's forces are still tiny. They were challenged effectively in Millwall by the Anti-Nazi League, and what was supposed to be the BNP's victory paper sale on Brick Lane, on the Sunday following the by-election, turned instead into a rout. *NSS* readers who are concerned about the BNP should join the practical protests whenever the party appears in public. Since the *NSS* Shoreditch HQ is hard on Brick Lane, I look forward to further sightings of the editorial staff down there one Sunday morning in the near future.

Finally, of course, it is the job of socialists to show people such as those in Millwall that there is a way of fighting back *other* than voting for Nazis. Here, the template has already been laid, in the work done by the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. So when *NSS* readers return from confronting the Nazis on the streets, they can settle down to another read of Phil Piratin's *Our Flag Stays Red.*

Keith Flett
London N17

Nuclear nonsense

In its advertisement in the issue of *NSS* dated 24 September 1993, Nuclear Electric asks: "Are we friends of the earth?" Well, no. What Nuclear Electric does not mention is its prolific output of radioactive waste—particularly spent nuclear fuel and redundant power stations. The scale of this environmental problem can perhaps be gauged from the estimated costs of trying to deal with it. The National Audit Office recently disclosed that dealing with Nuclear Electric's radioactive legacy will require £24.5 billion.

Despite this staggering sum, routine and accidental releases of radioactivity will continue, and even the designers of the proposed nuclear dump at Sellafield accept that it would leak eventually.

The financial planning to deal with these problems relies heavily on assumptions about when and how future generations will build dumps, dismantle power stations and expose themselves to residual radioactivity. The environmental cost is compounded by the ethical difficulty of forcing intractable problems on people who have had no say in, or benefit from, the original decision. As for tackling acid rain and the greenhouse effect, there are plenty of other options. These include energy efficiency in its many forms; renewable energy technologies; switching to gas; clean coal combustion; advanced steam cycles and combined heat and power; and, crucially, a sensible transport policy.

The best overall approach, whether market-based or government-led, is the one that selects the most cost-effective and cleanest mix of these options. In those circumstances, nuclear power would not stand a chance.

Clive Bates
Greenpeace
London N1

Amis culture

Chris Savage King ends her review of Martin Amis' *Visiting Mrs Nabakov and Other Excursions* ("Bits of rough", 1 October) thus: "Contemporary culture isn't ugly; it's rich and beautiful. And none of it has anything to do with Martin Amis." The spitefulness of the tone is *de rigueur* for women reviewing Amis *fils*, but she mustn't be allowed to get away with a clearly untrue statement. Amis is undeniably part of contemporary culture; it is impossible to discuss modern British fiction without mentioning him. Ms Savage King is entitled to her opinions, but she is not entitled to misrepresent the truth.

Tim Hopkins
Luton

Scrapping over Trident

For the fourth year running, a motion to reduce Britain's defence spending to the average for western Europe was carried at the Labour Party conference —this time by a margin of more than five to one. Aprior card vote on the motion to scrap Trident had a majority of four to three, but was rejected on the grounds that the former motion, on a show of hands, took precedence.

The official Labour attitude on defence is muddled and embarrassed. It is not logical to keep Trident and at the same time resolve to reduce defence spending to European levels. Trident is massively expensive on admitted estimates, and keeping it would entail huge cuts elsewhere in conventional weapons and personnel. Trident is, therefore, no favourite with the armed forces. Nor with the Americans, who are presently concerned with non-proliferation and a test ban, both of which the British Trident helps to obstruct. Questions are being asked in the US Congress about the cost of the British missiles—it appears that either the US is selling them to us at a substantial loss, or else

Min Cooper

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the real cost to us being concealed by imaginative accounting.

The muddled Labour thinking is well illustrated by shadow defence minister John Reid's justification for rejecting the majority vote to scrap Trident: "Our position stands, which is that we are not unilateralist." Extraordinary! A true multilateralist would, of course, scrap Trident. Only a committed unilateralist could agree with Britain's modern expansion of nuclear capability, at a time when reductions are the norm.

Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind commented on the Labour vacillation: "Labour has once again been revealed as naked on defence." Why does Labour take this kind of rubbish so seriously? Is it because it has little faith in the intelligence of the public? There is no logic behind Trident, but many people look upon it as a big stick that we ought not to give up. This is a very simple notion, which takes no account of the consequences of keeping Trident in the real world. In addition to all the excellent arguments usually put forward for getting rid of Trident could be added one more for Labour supporters. If the reasons were confidently explained to the British public, a resolve to scrap Trident would be a big vote-winner in today's Britain.

Harry Davis
Thames Ditton
Surrey

Never been born

Malachi O'Docherty ("Orangemen are not the only root", 24 September) implicitly dismisses as an example of pure bigotry the suggestion that heads of large families might find that social security benefits provide a better income than employment. He clearly thinks that the proposition is unworthy of discussion. He should think again.

By my reckoning, a man with six dependent children needs to earn about £15,000 a year, before tax, in order to match benefit income. Does Malachi O'Docherty believe we can afford to create unskilled jobs paying such wages? Do we start setting wages according to the number of dependents?

With six children in a family rather than two, there are four more potential unemployed. I hope O'Docherty can agree that if you haven't been born, you can't ever be unemployed or poor.

Robert Ballantine
London W6

Just Williams

I have been commissioned by the publishers Routledge to write the biography of Raymond Williams. In this project, I have the full support and approval of his family. I began field work earlier this year, and the finished manuscript is due to be with the publishers at the end of 1994. I would be most grateful to hear from any *NSS* readers who have personal information or anecdotes about any aspect of the life of Raymond Williams.

In particular, I would be most grateful for a sight of any letters or papers by him. In addition, if any *NSS* readers were particularly close to Raymond Williams and are prepared to make themselves available for a brief interview, I would also be immensely grateful to hear from them at the below address.

Fred Inglis
Professor of Cultural Studies and
Director of Graduate Studies
Department of Arts Education
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL

Frankie boy

As a little postscript to Jaci Stephens' delicious account of the Frank Sinatra television special (17 September), may I pass on a line that was current here in North America when Sinatra married Mia Farrow: "I always knew Frank would end up in bed with a boy."

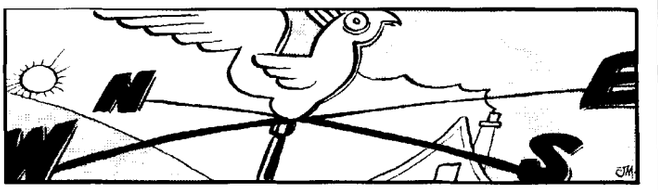
Barry Baldwin
University of Calgary
Alberta
Canada

Tommy McAvoy MP:

At the Labour Party conference in Brighton, in the *New Statesman Daily* conference briefing, we stated that Tommy McAvoy had spoken on platforms with the anti-abortion group SPUC.

We accept this is not the case, and we are happy to put the record straight.

FRINGE BENEFITS



Colin Ward gets turned off marble halls in an age like this

Orwell, who seldom gave way to the versifying urge, once wrote a poem ending: "I dreamed I dwelt in marble halls,/ And woke to find it true;/ I wasn't born for an age like this;/Was Smith? Was Jones? Were you?"

No, I was *not*, I said to myself last Tuesday week, scurrying through the rain along the Avenue de la Paix in Geneva, past the marble halls of the Palais des Nations (with sculptures by Eric Gill) and the headquarters of half-a-dozen bodies dedicated to humanity—WHO, ILO, Red Cross, Red Crescent and the UN Children's Fund—to the UN bookshop where the UN's new report *Progress of Nations* was on sale (available, price £4.60 inc p+p, from Unicef UK Committee, 55 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3NB).

It examines statistics on survival, health, nutrition, pre-school care, family planning and other factors affecting childhood, and finds that the condition of children in English-speaking countries has worsened in the past ten years, with one in ten children in Britain living in poverty and one in five in the US; this "when, in western Europe, the condition of children has consistently improved".

This shameful finding is of course a direct result of government policy, which in turn is a reflection of the changed values of an age like this. I'd been talking the previous night to a Swiss social worker about the decades of campaigning by Eleanor Rathbone for family allowances payable to the mother, which was finally put into legislation in the pro-child mood of postwar Britain, whittled away over the years, and is now under further threat.

Yet marble can be a symbol of changing values, as we found out while talking to Riccardo Mariani, professor of architecture at Geneva University, who comes from Carrara, the centre of both the marble-quarrying industry and of Italian anarchism.

We reflected on the years after the war when British architects went to Milan and were intoxicated by the sight of marble on the walls and floors of new bank buildings. Italian architects, on the other hand, who saw marble as a symbol of fascism, envied the schools and housing their British counterparts were working on, which they saw as a sign of the British determination to put first things first. Now, however, those system-built schools are collapsing for lack of maintenance, and the same lack has condemned the utilitarian housing. Meanwhile, in the new and often empty office blocks in the City of London, I am staggered by the marble surfaces all around.

"Sure," said Riccardo, "marble is a symbol of opulence and monumentality"; but in his home town, where it cost less than timber, bricks or concrete, it merely implied economy. He shivers at the thought of the chilly seat of the privy in his parents' house, and he also recalls the separate and forbidding culture of the quarrymen with their private language and big hands. But there came a day when he was first invited into their "Germinal" club, and heard the discussions there and saw the books available.

As monumental masonry was the local staple industry, it isn't surprising that the marble-workers have their own monuments. One is dedicated by the people of Carrara to Alberto Meschi, "anarchist and union member, builder of better times, magnificent spokesman for workers and outcasts, open to the wounds of man and society, who won a shorter working day for quarrymen and miners, quarrymen six and half hours, miners six".

The rhetoric describes everything our current rulers hate, from unionism to the limitation of the working day. So it isn't any surprise that the ultimate result filters down to the children and directly affects their wellbeing, as recorded in the Unicef report. Yet London is full of newly laid marble, from Broadgate to Canary Wharf. Smith, Jones and the rest of us weren't born for an age like this.

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The poor are part of the environment too. **Jeremy Seabrook** on the tribal peoples fighting for their land and livelihood in the Indian Borivali National Park

The nature of wealth

More than 70 hectares of land in north Bombay are covered with forest. Although this is known as the Borivali National Park, it is so only on paper, and the rights of those who live there have never been settled. This is a major misfortune for the *adivasis*, or tribal peoples, many of whom have lived here for hundreds of years.

There are now officially around 1,600 *adivasis* in the park. Some are descendants of the original inhabitants; others migrated here many years ago; more recently, they have been joined by others, non-*adivasis*, forced out of the Bombay slums by evictions and demolitions.

The park is a wildlife sanctuary and tourist attraction. On Sunday, it is a picnic site for Bombay people, who have few such amenities. In spite of this, the *adivasis*' plight has been ignored, even though they are close to the centre of India's richest metropolis.

Recent surveys showed that none of the children had been immunised; many were malnourished, and most had worms. Scabies and lice were common; most mothers were anaemic. Leprosy and alcoholism have taken a severe toll. Many of the *adivasis* had never seen a doctor; few knew their age. Their way of life, symbiotic with the forest, became degraded as they were denied the use of the forest produce that sustained them, and which they sustained.

It was not always like this, the people say. We had our own fields, we grew vegetables for our own use, with some to sell in the market. We had our own cattle, a farmhouse. Everything was taken from us when this became parkland. Suddenly, we went from having everything we needed, to having nothing at all. No notice was given to us, and no compensation.

In the area designated as the national park, the people's cattle and goats were confiscated and their small paddy-fields declared illegal. They became stigmatised as encroachers and despoilers of the environment: the paradox is that they have tended and nurtured the same forests for millennia.

None of the people has a ration-card, which means that although they are now among the world's poorest, they have no access to subsidised food in the ration-shops. They must walk-seven or eight kilometres to buy in the market, where even the coarsest grain is eight rupees a kilo. Some survive through brewing *daru*, illegal liquor, and many of the men are addicted. *Daru* is made from palm-sap, molasses, sometimes with the addition of battery fluid and chemicals. Each still has its own recipe. Many stills are owned by those who live outside the forest.

Some people sell bundles of twigs for firewood, both to the illicit stills and in the market beyond the forest boundary, although they are, in theory, forbidden to touch anything that grows. In the post-monsoon period, when the vegetation is lush and grows quickly, people cultivate vegetable patches: a few square metres, with a canopy of creepers about 1.5 metres high, with kakri and shirali cucumbers and gourds—ripening beneath. If these are discovered by forest officials, they will extract *hafta* (a bribe) of 100 rupees; and if the cultivator cannot pay, the vegetable plot will be destroyed.

One member of each family is supposed to be employed by the forest department at 700 rupees a month; but the work remains irregular and casual. The vast majority are without occupation, although the traditional forest skills are still remembered by some, and this helps them to survive on such produce as they can harvest—mushrooms, land-crabs, tubers like suran, and broad green-leaf vegetables that grow wild, chicha and bamboo shoots, which remain a standby in the leanest times of the year. Other plants have medicinal properties, traditional remedies against fever, coughs or diarrhoea.

The *adivasis* are always exploited; not only by the forest department, whose dedication to conservation of the forest remains entirely subordinate to the conservation of their own privilege. As prices rise, forest officers pressure the *adivasis* with unofficial fines and bribes, in order to maintain their own standard of living. They also take money from herders of goats and buffaloes, who then graze their animals in the park. The damage the animals do to the tender shoots and young trees is then blamed on the *adivasis*.

In the park are the Kanheri Caves. On the steps leading up to the site, women sell vegetables, fruits and drinking-water to tourists at 50 paise a tumbler-full. When they hear the jeep of the forest officer climbing the slope, the women run and hide their goods, or they will be confiscated. Shantibhai has six children, and she earns between 30 to 40 rupees a day selling *peru* (guavas), which she collects each day from Borivali station, five kilometres away. In her tray of fruits, she has stuck a bright peacock feather. After the monsoon, she says, there is no clean water, no electricity. She came from Dahanu, 100 kilometres away, at the time of her marriage.

The forest trees soar above the new season's growth: tamarind trees, gulmohar, apata, with the leaves of which they roll *bidis* (cigarettes), mango, jamun, pangara, karanji. The people are Warlis, and have made their houses in traditional *adivasi* style: a rough platform of stones is constructed and coated with *mitti* (mud). Part of this forms a verandah, and part the interior floor. The walls are of *karvi*, thin wooden sticks, held in place with red earth from the forest floor, and fitted into a wooden frame. The eaves of the roof hang low; the roof is of dried palm-leaves, held down by a rough lattice of twigs and branches.

Laxmi says that they use the forest only with the greatest care; they harvest the produce renewably, and never damage trees: they know exactly how much they can take for their survival. The care of the forest ought to be entrusted to them; yet they are persecuted as though they were the cause of damage to an environment, of which the cool sweet-smelling houses are the living tissue. In order

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to use wood in house construction, they must give 1,000 rupees to the forest officials.

Dhumpada is a small village, reached only by crossing a stream about eight metres wide, shallow, but clear after the rains. On the opposite side, the village offers a scene of the utmost desolation. The people use the same watering-hole as the animals, and a five-year-old child was mauled by a panther and died earlier this year. The parents were compensated by the forest department; but the father is alcoholic and the money did not last long.

Ramdas has lived here all his life; prematurely old, with a sheen of silver stubble on his face. His legs bear the mark of early malnutrition. His hut consists of a single room, with a floor of beaten earth; a stove of three bricks, and fire on which a pot of rice simmers. There are some chappatis and watery vegetables. A little shrine stands against the wall—a flame burns in some oil, and the white heart of a coconut shines in the darkness. Apart from a string of clothes and bedroll, there is nothing else in the hut. Ramdas and his wife, who is blind in one eye, have lost all five of their children. Most died in infancy, but the last one, a girl in her teens, died recently. They have the air of resigned neglect of all whose children have predeceased them. Ramdas earns a few rupees by collecting dead wood and selling it in the market; if an official sees him, he will be fined 40 or 50 rupees.

The government and forest department have offered to "relocate" the forest-dwellers in a small settlement on the edge, in a kind of purpose-built township. Nothing could be more inimical to their well-being. Already these *adivasis* have been completely Hinduised; only in more remote areas do strong traces of animism remain. The Warlis traditionally painted with rice flour on the mud walls of their huts. The Warlis in the park have virtually lost this skill, apart from one old woman; and she says their struggle to survive is too arduous, and there is little to celebrate.

The advantages of the park are for the privileged, for whom ample amenities are provided—ice-cream stands, tea stalls, minibuses to go to see the lions. But nothing for the *adivasis*, whose land it was, and whose land it remains. The best way to manage the forest would be by not by providing out-relief for forest officers, whose interest in it is minimal; but by giving the land over to the care of the *adivasis*, with permission to cultivate a small patch of ground for their subsistence. This would protect both forest and people. But the current system, faithfully reflecting, as it does, the priorities of the rich, means that the supremely dispensable element in the conservation programme is the poor.

In the injustice to the already impoverished, we may see, in microcosm, the meaning of the sudden concern for the environment that the privileged have recently discovered. Nature, it seems, must be preserved as an amenity for the already advantaged. In this process, it is, once again, the poor who will pay, in the form of exclusion, marginalisation and degradation of a way of life already pushed to the very edge of subsistence.

GREEN GAUGE

As Proudhon might have said, Intellectual Property Rights are theft. **Vicky Hutchings** on the fate of the neem

As a million Indian farmers protested on 2 October against the multinationals that are turning India's own knowledge of plants and centuries-old techniques against them, there were even solidarity demonstrations in London last week. But then the "third world" has had a long history of doing a lot of the work for free, and from which we in the rich north all benefit: from one part of South America alone came potatoes, maize, tomatoes and soya beans, cultivated by Incan farmers. A more recent case is that of the rosy periwinkle. Used by shamen in Madagascar, aware of its remarkable medicinal properties, it is now marketed by Eli Lilly as a virtual cure for Hodgkin's disease and childhood leukaemia, with remission rates as high as 90 per cent. Neither Madagascar nor the shamen have received a penny in return.

As the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade negotiations continue, various rows have erupted over the years. But this isn't like the well-publicised squabble over farm subsidies between the rich trading blocs. This battle is over intellectual property rights, or the way US-style patent laws are being forced on to poor countries through the Gatt, countries whose actual well-being depends on there *not* being any laws of the kind.

Here is the story of the neem tree, *Azadirachta indica*. According to an article to be published in the November issue of the *Ecologist*, this is the sort of tree you take home to meet your parents. The bark, leaves, flowers, seeds and fruit are all used "to treat a wide range of diseases ranging from leprosy and diabetes to ulcers, skin disorders and constipation". The twigs are used as antiseptic toothbrushes. Oil, extracted from the seeds, is a contraceptive; it is also burnt in lamps and used to make toothpaste and soap.

There is, apparently, no end to the tree's talents: neem cake, left over after oil extraction, is an animal feed; the leaves function as a fertiliser. But most important of all is the tree's killing potential: around 200 insects, including locusts, Colorado beetles and boll weevils, go in fear of the emulsion extracted from the seeds. This is one of the most effective natural insecticides ever to be discovered, and extraction techniques have been known for centuries. Even the wood is poisonous to something and has a chemical resistance to termites, being therefore in great demand as a building material. Indeed, one feels, if asked nicely, this tree might build you a house itself.

However, actions by W R Grace and Co, an American chemical giant, will mean any profits from all this accruing to W R Grace, which owns the US patent for a neem-based insecticide, brand name Margosan-O, and not to India or the Indian farmers. This might have been ignored, except for the not-unrelated fact that the price of neem seeds in India has risen nearly thirtyfold, out of the range of the average farmer. The justification for the patent is the claim that a "novel process" is being used to extract the emulsion—a claim, say Indian scientists quoted in the *Ecologist*, that can only be made in the light of "the ignorance of the west". Grace will initially buy up and process 20 tonnes of neem seeds a day for export. The US pesticide market is worth $2 billion.

While different countries now have their own patent laws, this will change under Gatt. Countries will be forced into a regime of intellectual property rights, based on private ownership, the definition of which specifically excludes the sorts of knowledge and innovation that take place in the "global commons"—among tribal peoples, in small villages and farms. And they must be trade-related. Article 27.1 sets out the condition that recognition as an IPR depends on "innovation [being] capable of industrial application".

Unable to get hold of their neem seeds any more, certainly unable to afford Margosan-O, no wonder Indian farmers are demanding a change to Gatt. Gatt isn't even officially here yet, but they have seen the future and it doesn't work. They want the right to benefit from the knowledge, and work, done by their ancestors. If IPRs have to come, they want them to be *collective*.

In India, not only are agricultural products not recognised as patentable; neither are medicines or drugs. India only recognises "processes" as patentable. This means that when a new brand-name drug arrives on the world market, generic versions of the same drug appear in India three or four years later at a fraction of the cost—just as soon as their scientists have worked out a way of making it by a different method. India's export market is growing all the time; not only to struggling countries of the former USSR, but, ironically, to the US, UK, Japan and France as well. Under Gatt, this too will all have to stop.

Expensive drugs and medicines, high-priced pesticides, the spectre of genetically altered and patented seed varieties, based on those planted by third-world farmers, and on which these same farmers will have to pay royalties—this is what Gatt means for those who can least afford to pay the price.

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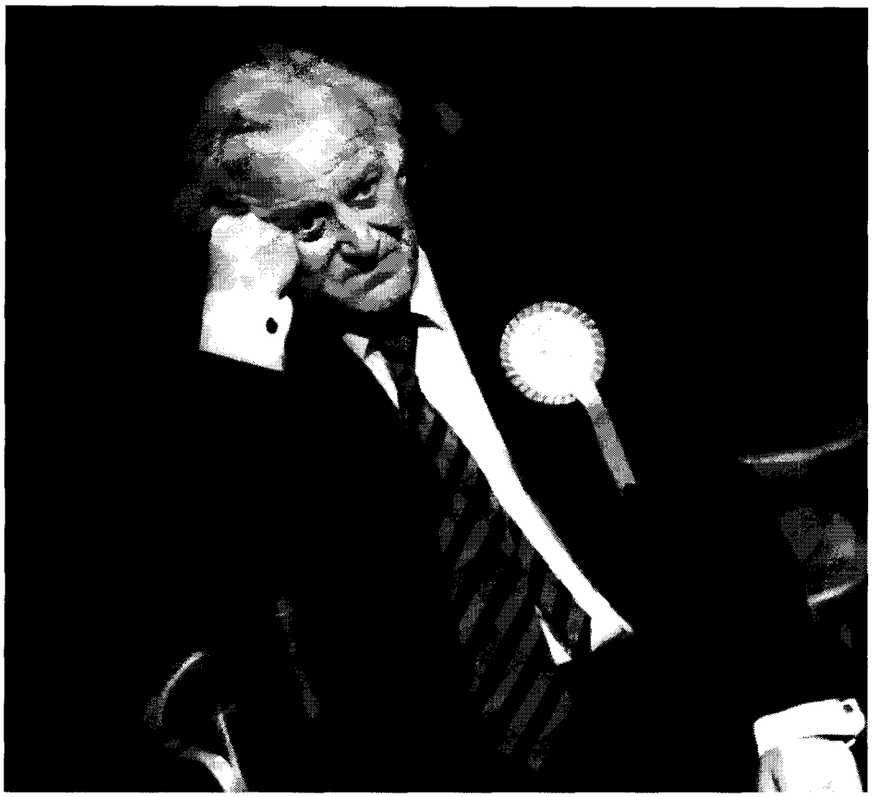

Remorse and self-inspection: John Thaw as George Jones

David Hare has made a three-part drama out of the crisis in British institutions. But **Kirsty Milne** finds that his new anatomy of Labour's failure lacks breadth and depth

A small party

Once upon a time, there was a Labour leader who lost. He had one chance to win an election, and he lost. In private, this leader was warm and witty, a man of culture and integrity. In public, he was a windbag with a shaky grasp of policy. TV interviewers tripped him up. Shadow cabinet colleagues put him down. Rumour had it that he wasn't up to the job.

Staff in the leader's private office shielded, chivvied and cosseted him. They lived in a state of perpetual vigilance, poised to pre-empt potential gaffes. The man who should have been his party's greatest asset was treated as its greatest liability.

Old hands have rushed to condemn *The Absence of War*, David Hare's portrayal of a panicky Labour election campaign. They might pause to consider the implied compliment when a writer accords Labour the status of a great British institution. *The Absence of War* completes a trilogy that brackets Her Majesty's loyal opposition with the Church of England (*Racing Demon*) and the criminal justice system (*Murmuring Judges*). Eminent stablemates for an upstart that did not see the light of day until 1906.

Besides, here is none of the viciousness and chauvinism depicted in recent dramas of the left (see Alan Bleasdale's *GBH*, or the recent BBC2 series *Love and Reason*). Hare's apparatchiks are well-intentioned people who have lost the courage of their convictions. Power can only be won, they believe, with a manifesto and a leader as bland as processed cheese. But the pungent reality they have to work with is George Jones (John Thaw, discarding his sardonic *Morse* manner), an affable south London socialist with a liking for Shakespeare but no Oxbridge degree.

Like Neil Kinnock, like David Hare himself, Jones is a child of the 1940s, and heir to a postwar loss of nerve. The war is a watershed in Hare's work (most painfully in *Plenty*). After it comes accidie. The best lack all conviction. *The Absence of War* starts and ends at the Whitehall Cenotaph, as Jones worries "Could we have done more?"

The Hare trilogy grew out of the author's belief that: "What's interesting now is how groups of people live together." The theatre had seen heroes followed by anti-heroes; it was time to look at institutions. In the 1970s, Hare had written and directed for small, radical companies such as Joint Stock. Now he turned to the vast Olivier stage at the (Royal) National Theatre. The establishment saw itself anatomised as Hare faced down the insistent individualism of the 1980s.

He has acquired a reputation as an earnest moralist—a label that stuck after *The Secret Rapture* examined the topic of goodness. Yet the trilogy's comedy quotient is pleasingly high; if this is 19th-century naturalism, it is George Eliot rather than Zola. *Racing Demon* contains an immortal scene in which clerics go on the razzle, downing tequila sunrises in the Savoy. In *Murmuring Judges*, a High Court grandee (the marvellous Michael Bryant) describes to a hungry Home Secretary how that evening's venison will be served—in such detail that the politician's gastric juices can almost be heard to churn.

Of the three plays, the most ambitious is *Murmuring Judges*, which shows how courts, prisons and police co-exist in a state of mutual incomprehension. The script sometimes sounds like a research briefing: a detective announces that the average policeman witnesses one crime every ten years, and a QC reminds his junior that three-quarters of all cases come to the barrister the night before trial. The Home Secretary tackles his host on prison overcrowding, citing with approval the German trend towards non-custodial sentences. With Michael Howard in post, these lines sound implausibly liberal.

Murmuring Judges bears witness to Hare's passion for portraying women as keepers of conscience. An Irish victim of crooked police work is befriended by a black barrister (Alphonsia Emmanuel), while his case also troubles a high-flying young policewoman (Katrina Levon, a disappointing substitute for the original Lesley Sharp). Both rebel against the professional injunction "Don't get emotionally involved". You could argue that it is fitting for the whistleblowers to be female: as outsiders, women are better placed to see flaws in the system. But burden an actress with virtue, and she may be reduced to a cipher whose function is to do the right thing.

Racing Demon will hold up better. It is funnier and less schematic: the liberal's and reformer's instincts are apportioned to two different characters, and the audience's sympathy is not so obviously skewed. The tolerant Anglican rector (convincingly played by Oliver Ford Davies) is ineffectual in his inner-city parish; the zealous evangelical (Adam Kotz) is the one who gets things done.

In the wake of these big plays on big canvases, *The Absence of War* seems oddly limited. Despite huge slide-projections of Westminster, the characters are a small gang in a goldfish bowl. We see little of the shadow cabinet. The trade unions get scarcely a mention. No NEC, no mods and trads; no sense of the wider party. But Richard Eyre's production bears the stigmata of the 1992 campaign trail. Smart-suited women service their leader with shirts, cigarettes and whisky; ersatz drama erupts in darkened TV studios.

Authentic, yes; engrossing, no. There can never be much suspense about the election result, but the play also lacks the crises of

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conscience, the moments of revelation or betrayal that electrify parts one and two. In *Racing Demon*, the curate's girlfriend (Saskia Wickham) has to watch as his humanity loses out to his faith. In *Murmuring Judges*, there is the policewoman's growing suspicion that the detective she looks up to is "bent".

The Absence of War offers a different kind of dilemma: a battle over how to approach the electorate. Intriguingly, the people who damp Jones' exuberance are not rose-touting PR men like Peter Mandelson (who came to the first night). They are the leader's crack troops from his own private office (with Oliver Ford Davies bizarrely cast as a Charles Clarke figure). Jones is kept off topics such as defence or northern Ireland. Frustrated, he wails: "Why can't I speak of what I believe?"

It is the ad-woman from the outside world (Clare Higgins) who urges the leader to rediscover his real personality. "Be yourself," she advises. But when Jones tries to address a rally without prepared notes, he breaks down before his audience. He cannot recover his past spontaneous form or remember how to "be himself". The question is left hanging: would it have worked? Do you offer the electorate what they say they want—or what you think they should have?

The David Hare Trilogy runs at the Olivier Theatre until 20 November; "The Absence of War" continues after that date

Liz Evans explains what techno and trainspotting have in common

Taking toys from boys

In 1982, Kate Bush released her first entirely self-produced album. Called *The Dreaming*, it reached number three in the British charts, but sold less well than its three predecessors. The reaction of her record company, EMI, was to inform her that she could not work without a producer again. In response, Kate Bush went home, built her own studio and spent as long as she liked making *Hounds Of Love*. Claiming technology for her own, she defied corporate confines and poked the patriarchs well and truly in the eye.

Traditionally, women have developed a rather unfriendly relationship with technology. Steered away from science and maths at school, girls are often discouraged from choosing studies that could later give them access to technological spheres such as engineering. But for Kate Bush, taking control of her own technological environment has allowed her to create exactly what she wants.

These days, with more and more female musicians finding success in the mainstream and independent charts, women's relationships with technology, in this area at least, are changing. Many women now playing with their own bands reject the typically male approach of learning an instrument in isolation for years. Instead, they are plugging into amplifiers after mere months of practice.

"Boys are much more likely to get a guitar for their 13th birthday and sit there learning to play Led Zeppelin licks and traditional blues riffs," says Miki Berenyi, who with Emma Anderson writes the songs, plays guitar and sings with Lush, a band signed to the 4AD label (home to the Cocteau Twins). "Girls don't have the same level of patience. They're much more likely to teach themselves in a more erratic way than to sit there learning someone else's music for six years. Girls don't show off as much; they're not so much like trick cyclists."

Despite women's increasing involvement in the music industry, there is still one area that remains almost exclusively a male domain. Hardcore techno—the extreme and somewhat unemotional end of dance music—is produced mainly by men working in isolation in studios, or at home alone with more basic

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equipment. As well as educational conditioning, more general adolescent interests may deter women from this kind of activity.

Boys tend to talk about music, swap information, show off their knowledge and remove themselves from the feelings music arouses. Girls are much more likely to be interested in pop's personalities than the technical aspects. As a result, it's mainly men who end up gaining access to studio jobs, and who operate in the techno arena. According to Jon Fugler of the dance band Fluke (whose members were also part of the techno-dance label Boys Own), women artists are now interested in understanding what goes on in the studio: "But there aren't any techno-women as such."

Pete Waterman of the hugely successful production team Stock, Aitken and Waterman (responsible for the hi-tech pop sounds of Kylie Minogue, Sonia, Bros) has a lifelong obsession involving a psychology similar to studio work and techno music. He is a trainspotter. He has observed that the attention to detail developed through trainspotting has helped him in the studio to see things others have missed.

Trainspotting is a very ordered and mathematical pastime, about collecting numbers and absorbing timetables. Although sociable up to a point, it has very little to do with the sometimes irrational and potentially dangerous elements of human relationships. "The most exciting thing is when a train is late, or a timetable gets jumbled up," explains James Holmes, star of the one-man play *Anorak Of Fire*. "The excitement lies in a disturbance of the schedule. Waiting is the most exciting thing, and then when it happens, when these trains arrive, it's dead quick ... The character I play certainly has problems keeping reality at bay. He's totally obsessed with it. There really is no point in being a part-time train spotter."

Joe Weizenbaum, professor of computing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has been working with computers since the 1950s. He has described a syndrome where male computer workers become so engrossed in their work that they neglect their bodily needs and sleep in cots next to their machines. Kate Bush has written a song about a similar condition, "Deeper Understanding" (on her last album *The Sensual World*). Rather than employing technology to liberate themselves, these men—like trainspotters who live for a passing engine—are slaves to an obsession unconnected with human experience.

Techno boffins similarly work long shifts, shutting themselves up in studios where they endlessly seek excitement from inorganic noise. Women do not appear to desire such alienation from life, but if they ever do become significantly involved with hardcore techno, they will doubtless transform the tradition to create something as vital as the rock and pop female bands are currently producing. After all, how many female trainspotters do you know?

Kate Bush's new album "The Red Shoes" is released on EMI this week

Street credibility: ordinary folk in a hole, in "Raining Stones"

Jonathan Romney takes the rough with the smooth in British movies

High gloss, true grit

Rumours of British cinema's decease are premature; but then so are the periodic outbursts of squawking about its miraculous rejuvenation. Britain has a cinema, it's just that it doesn't have one that is allowed to evolve under its own steam. If this country were producing a consistent output of film, as France does, it wouldn't matter if much of it were substandard. At least the question of how to reinvent British cinema wouldn't be asked every time a new film was released.

Because British cinema comes strictly in fits and starts, film-makers here are in a peculiar situation. Every film, however minor or marginal, carries an inordinate burden of expectation. Every one is expected to herald a glorious new era both imaginatively and commercially; and every one that doesn't is seen as another ignominious nail in the coffin. And every new British film is expected to reinvent, as if from scratch, the question of how to represent the nation.

You can see this responsibility weighing heavy on Danny Cannon's *Young Americans* (Odeon, West End from 8 October). It presents itself not only as a reinvention of the British gangland thriller—that great lost genre, docklands *noir*—but also sets out fairly crudely to dramatise British film's relationship with Hollywood. Britain misses out on every count. Resourceful tyro Cannon hauls in a couple of American stars—a funding necessity—ostensibly to represent the Americanisation of Britain. In fact, he's ended up writing himself a nice calling-card to Beverly Hills.

Young Americans is a wilful anachronism: a return to a geographical terrain that was once the stamping ground of Bonar Colleano and Stanley Baker, but stalked more recently by small-screen heavies of the *Sweeney* school. Harvey Keitel—already accumulating the doughy paternal gravitas of Jean Gabin—is a New York cop who comes to London to clamp down on Viggo Mortensen's drugs empire.

Keitel and Mortensen provide box-office weight, but also allow Cannon to inject a paranoid theme of London's annexation by America. The American drugs baron and detective have infinitely more nous than the flabby homegrown talent: stiff-upper-lip duffers in the Yard (Iain Glen and John Wood) and past-their-prime hoods like the 1960s villain Callow (Terence Rigby), who casts a sad, nostalgic eye on the old school of noble thuggery. The new cool school are the Young Americans of the title—Mortensen's rave-going, leather-anoraked heavies who, Deptford accents notwithstanding, could have stepped out of an Ice-T lyric sheet.

But the film is completely on the side of New World glamour. Its nostalgia for the 'ard bastards and grimy perspectives of yesteryear is only skin deep. It really argues that if the new British scene is to have any glamour, it must be through an American optic. That's not the same as Melville and the *nouvelle vague* buying in American stereotypes wholesale; they scrambled them beyond recognition through their peculiar Gallic lens.

What Cannon gives us is an American view focused through the *lingua franca* of advertising convention. The American-ness of *Young Americans* gives us London as an exotic Other, but not the picture-postcard Other of *A Fish Called Wanda* (no red buses on Tower Bridge here). Instead, it's London

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seen as a variant of Chicago, the London of credit card ads. Cannon and photographer Vernon Layton give us the hyper-glossy camerawork that summons up the tune of "Easy" and cashpoints in docklands on Sunday morning. No amount of blood-red skylines can make this into a real place.

The script is dead on its feet, the juvenile leads dishearteningly winsome, the older hands simply hamstrung. Keitel, above all, has nothing to do but phone home and mull over videos of *The Blue Lamp* or something very like it. Cannon's not interested in representing London, just in shooting it. If the sheer alien luxury of the result is his sole aim, his achievement is extraordinary.

If you expect anything else, the film's a dog. There is one moment you won't have seen anywhere else: a wall of swaying humanity, filling the Panavision screen. No one has shot a football crowd on screen with such enormity; if Cannon had elsewhere managed to connect with everyday life, the visuals might just have sufficed.

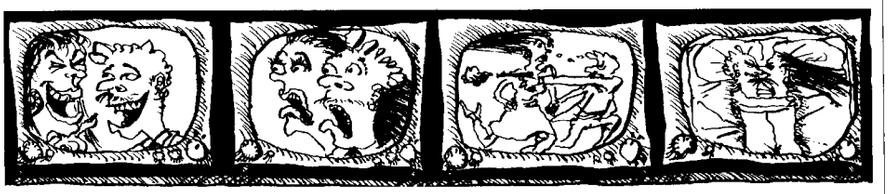
For Ken Loach, the problems of representing Britain are the same as they ever were. There's no rethinking cinema in *Raining Stones* (on general release from 8 October). But Loach makes it his business to keep abreast of the real in a way that few filmmakers still do. He reads the headlines when everyone else is bickering over genre. Of course, he's a dinosaur, not only in the sort of film he makes—there's little stylistic difference between this one and *Kes*—but in his conception of cinema as a rallying-point for some timeless notion of working-class solidarity. This is the man who seriously suggested that the salvation of British cinema lay in taking films into the pubs.

Raining Stones takes its model from old-fashioned dramatic naturalism. The structure is pure Zola, placing ordinary people in an inconceivably awful situation that rises out of a greater reality they can't control. The difference is that Loach needs to impress on us the possibility of hope. So he keeps things on a resolutely comic note, and provides an ironic let-out that's gratifying but also risibly easy.

Forget the plot, and one's left with an affirmation of faith that the everyday can be caught on screen almost undiluted. This is the last stand of the slice-of-life. To achieve it, Loach takes a detour through the soap opera—hence the casting of ex-*Brooksider* Ricky Tomlinson as the hero's best mate. Loach and his writer Jimmy Allen lay the disasters on as relentlessly as the title suggests: a stolen van, the family purse running dry, a succession of jobs going wrong, and young Colleen needing a communion dress.

At the centre, Bruce Jones as long-suffering Bob suggests a bottomless well of resourcefulness, integrity and good humour in the face of despair. It's Jones and the rest of the cast who are responsible for the film surviving its schematic conception; and it's Loach who is responsible for coaxing it out of them. No one will look to *Raining Stones* to redraw the map of British cinema, but it exists resolutely according to its own rules. And it's really rather wonderful, in spite of them.

JACI STEPHEN



In soaps, sex beats school every time. Do we believe that getting an education means betraying the community?

The casting department of *Coronation Street* (ITV, Monday, Wednesday, Friday) could never have predicted that Tracey Barlow was going to grow into such a buxom lass, but they clearly can't believe their luck. Sulky teenagers with small breasts never push their parents to the limits; they never leave school at 16 to go and live with whatever piece of mobile grease is passing their door that day.

Tracey's well-developed chest, however, has given her the confidence to do all three. She confessed that not only did the piece of grease pass her door; she slept with it too, which just about makes her the youngest person ever to have Done It on the *Street*. It certainly makes her the only one Doing It and Enjoying It at present.

This newly blossomed sexuality has, quite appropriately, come about during Tracey's employment at the flower shop ("florist's" is a little grand). She has failed to notice that the dead chrysanthemum sitting on her boss's scalp is passing for a hair-do and, even more mysteriously, that the shop hasn't seen a customer in roughly eight months. Her mind has been on her body, but then so has that of most hot-blooded males who have been monitoring Tracey's growth over the years.

The *Street* is currently spending a lot of time on the younger generation, priming them for future greatness and ensuring there are enough characters to follow a storyline through after the many regulars fall off their respective perches. Andy McDonald is engaged to Amy, a black woman who also happens to be a single mother (*very* PC), his brother Steve is still seeing Alec's granddaughter Victoria, and Jenny Bradley has returned with the aim of seeing how much lead is in every pencil on the *Street*.

Amy is a shelf-stacker in Bettabuys, a career that has not endeared her to the McDonald family. It has been made clear, however, that shelf-stacking was not her vocation. She had a place at university but was prevented from attending when she got pregnant.

This makes her the latest in a long line of *Street* youngsters who jack in their education—Tracey, Andy, Steve, Amy, Jenny—because in order to breed a new generation of *Street* stars, foregoing further education is the only means of keeping youngsters in the immediate vicinity. Ken Barlow remains the only person who has completed a university course. He was the only person to have done so 30 years ago, and it looks as if he'll be the only one to have done so 30 years from now.

In British soaps, it's always sex that prevents characters enjoying education. They have it off once and their brains shut down. Studying is seen as an activity for freaks.

When Curly Watts went to college, he was the butt of jokes at the Rovers' Return for years. *EastEnders*' Michelle, now studying for a degree, is constantly sneered at for being too big for her boots. It's true that if ever an argument were needed for falling standards in higher education institutions, she is it; but nobody's educational aspirations deserve to come under continual attack from the many brainless nitwits who inhabit Albert Square.

The threat of education is a phenomenon that characterises only British soaps. Australian soaps, constantly ridiculed in this country for their lack of intellectual content, emphasise the importance of education. The youngsters put homework first, dates second, and suffer the wrath of families and teachers if they don't. School is a sacred institution, teachers know best and the improvement of the individual through higher education is perceived not as a right but a privilege.

The same is true of the youngsters in American soaps. Moralistic in tone, heavy on respect, personal growth and kindness to those less fortunate than ourselves, much US soap, comedy and drama stresses that education is the key to all these things. Incomplete homework is tantamount to a national crime, and a refusal to acknowledge The Teacher as the fount of all goodness, knowledge and wisdom almost warrants a slot on the list of America's Most Wanted.

It's something of a mystery, therefore, why Britain, which claims education systems superior to both countries, should in popular television present education as a threat to be treated with suspicion; almost a liability in the day-to-day running of one's life.

The educated are always outsiders, and to achieve acceptance they are required to normalise themselves, which always means rejecting every means of betterment. Loyalty to the community is more important than self-improvement; so education is seen as a rejection of the foundations on which you have built your life.

Our soaps, however, are simply a sad reflection of the distrust of and contempt for education rife in Britain, and this prevailing attitude explains why our education system is in such a mess. The only comfort in thinking that Ken Barlow is the acceptable face of education is in knowing that Andy McDonald is not.

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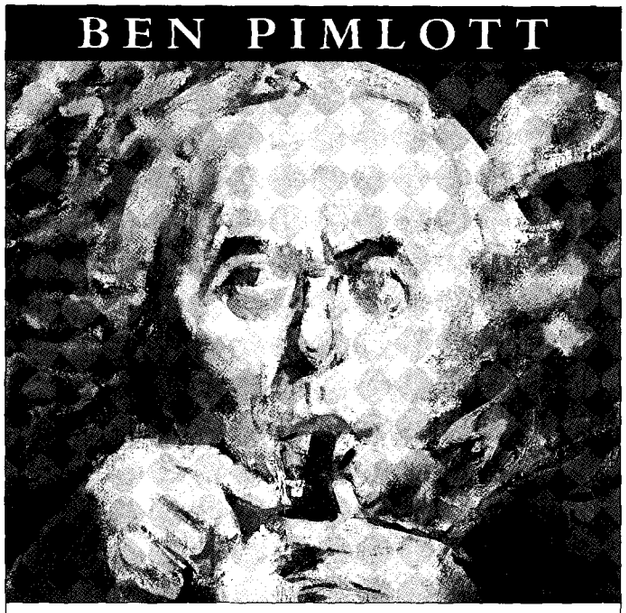

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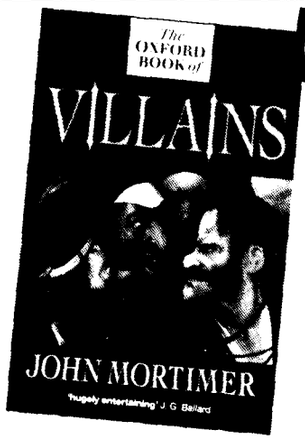

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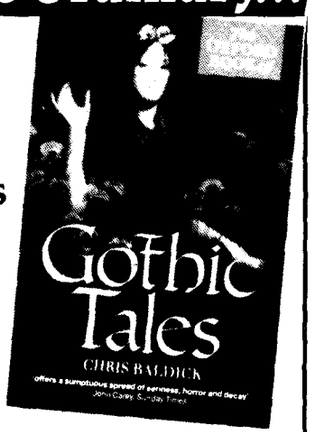

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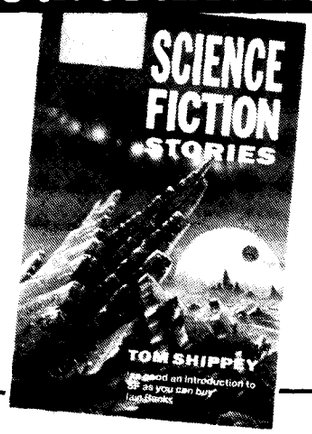

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Gentleman's relish

UNITED STATES: ESSAYS 1952-1992
Gore Vidal
André Deutsch, £25

Roz Kaveney

Reading this book is an intrusion, an eavesdropping on a private dialogue between America's greatest living belle-lettriste/agitator and the United States of his ideals, or perhaps of his fantasies. He would like to talk to America, to the Just Republic. But failing that, knowing that it never existed, he will talk to Americans and, most often, talk down to them from the height of his arrogance, intelligence and wit.

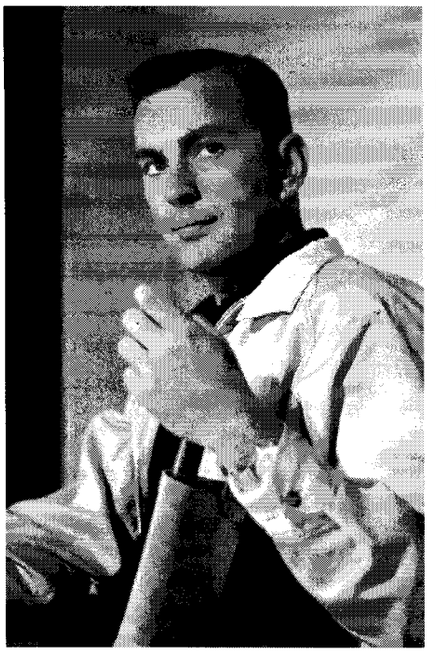
His reviews are a serious and sober call to read better; his polemics a call to Americans to discard illusions about politics, religion, history and sex; his more general essays a call for that *joie de vivre* debauched out of Americans by the synthetic pleasures of consumerism. His tendency to the mandarin and the over-subtle is mitigated by his sense of simple pleasures—whether the flying lessons of his boyhood or the elegant humiliation of his enemies.

Other artists in his position have played with paradox; he lives it. To rebuke a society for intellectual frivolity, he performs on its chat shows. He is Jeremiah, but a Jeremiah so committed to his message that he will endure the shame of motley to preach it and act as the licensed jester of the American imperium.

Some of his most telling essays are those in which he talks of men and women, dedicated to public service, whom he knew in childhood and adolescence. His isolationist grandfather, Senator Gore, and his family friend, Eleanor Roosevelt, were bitter political enemies; what united them was a devotion to the republic.

Vidal is often flippant and name-dropping when he writes about his Washington childhood, but there is an underlying seriousness that makes his memoir pieces particularly impressive. What was important about Gore and Eleanor was not that they were right, or even that they were unimpeachably honest, but that they put the republic ahead of their own comfort. His scepticism about the blessed Kennedy dynasty is based on a sense that they did not.

The sequence of novels about American political history, which is his finest achievement, is of its nature a replacement for actual power. Vidal has stood for, but never been elected to, public office, and his closest relationship to power has been that of an informed outsider: the son, the stepbrother-in-law, the seventh cousin, tolerated at tea and dinner but shut out of the Oval Office. The power of those novels comes from the fact that the also-ran, the poor relation, may not be directly useful to the republic but has a fine vantage-point for fictions that will educate the powerful in what they are doing, and how it looks.



An outlaw, but always a gentleman: the young master pictured in New York, 1953, in a portrait by the legendary Horst; from Martin Kazmaier's "Horst: sixty years of photography" (Thames & Hudson)

Such is the corruption of intellectual life by the academy that the gentleman-scholar and artist is forced to get his hands dirty in historiography. Vidal is a writer of fiction, but the fact that he is traducing sacred beliefs has not escaped attention. The essays here in which he trounces patriot historians for impugning his accuracy are a guilty pleasure, and not his best work; men not his equals are getting in the way of his work for the republic, and he will stamp them down into ridicule.

Sense of duty is central to Vidal, and admirable. What is more problematic is that it forms part of a carefully constructed and maintained sense of ego that includes other aristocratic affectations. His contempt for the standard machismo of the male American writer—a contempt we can here see growing over the years in his inexorable quarrel with Norman Mailer, once his friend—holds locked within it a cult of silent personal toughness allied to intolerance for weakness. He has problems with camp, which he only ever resolved in *Myra Breckinridge*. There, the transsexual protagonist parodied Vidal's own messianic tendency, his attempt to put the clock back and make the times run right.

His writings on sexuality point to one difficulty with the anti-essentialist, social-construction hypothesis of its formation. For Vidal, this intellectually reputable argument that there are no sexual identities, only sexual acts, overlaps rather too heavily with a gentlemanly *sprezzatura*: a statement that one, being who one is, may take one's pleasure privately with whom one chooses.

He has defended this position with a courage and wit that put to shame many Gay Liberationist academics and activists. His independence from left piety meant he could attack Norman Podhoretz's attempt to mate homophobia with Zionism, and not worry about (unjust) accusations of anti-Semitism. His attacks on the heterosexual dictatorship have, however, not always been phrased in terms calculated to give heart to a working-class lesbian in Macclesfield.

Vidal's cult of personal gallantry and prowess excludes, by its nature, a capacity for solidarity and limits his sympathies. He is intolerant of writers who are doing things of which he cannot immediately see the point. His sniping at Thomas Pynchon, for example, looks shabby when one reads his own more ludic books; the author of *Duluth* is not entitled to sneer at the author of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Generally, he is right to question whether writers belong in the belly of the academy, whether the novel should be an elite form. Oddly, he has never considered popular or genre fiction, except to sneer at it, and he rarely mentions or lists his own early thrillers.

His preference is for writers who stand alone, and preferably for writers who are outlaws and gentlemen, whatever their sex. He writes well about other crusaders for some of the same causes, like Edmund Wilson and Christopher Isherwood, particularly when he can distance himself from their vices: Wilson's taste for drunkenness and landscape-writing, Isherwood's religiosity. He has a gift for friendship, not unalloyed with amiable malice; his pieces on such old associates as Tennessee Williams are as much memoir as review, reminding one why candid friends are dreaded.

His essays on less-known writers like Dawn Powell and Frederic Prokosch are entertaining sales pitches. He honours piety to forgotten friends and duty to the canon. There is also here, though, a sense of the sad nobility of failure, which overlaps with his sense of waste at Yukio Mishima's suicide.

Vidal is ruthless with himself, knows that he has not saved the republic. His sympathies are with Myra and Julian, who fail to remake the world to their heart's desire, to prevent the triumph of Christianity and television. He is less sympathetic to those who, like the Buddha in *Creation* or Kelly in *Kalki*, succeed in imposing their visions. Failure is the prerogative of the gentleman as well; the successful of this world, whether Christ or Reagan, are so deeply vulgar.

George Orwell remarked of H G Wells, with

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whom he had his differences (Wells called him a shit), that when he was growing up, he crucially felt that Wells was on his side. No one who regards themselves as a radical, a pervert or a humanist can fail to be irritated by Vidal's manner and much of his substance; but no one should forget that he has, for the past 40 years, been a powerful and witty voice on the side of Us against Them. He has been the irregular outrider of good causes: flexible, mobile and, like good light cavalry, able to lead the enemy on to ice that bears his weight, but not theirs.

Comrade citizens

LABOURISM AND THE ENGLISH GENIUS: THE STRANGE DEATH OF LABOUR ENGLAND?
Gregory Elliott
Verso, £12.95 paperback/£34.95 hardback
THE LONG DEATH OF BRITISH LABOURISM: INTERPRETING A POLITICAL CULTURE
Willie Thompson
Pluto Press, £10.95 paperback/£35 hardback

Tony Wright

Here we go again. Is there really room in the market for yet more accounts of the general futility of poor old labourism? Evidently so. Those wishing to retrace the steps of Ralph Miliband and Ken Coates, Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, and assorted lesser travellers on the highroad and byways of what Willie Thompson calls this "sorry tradition" are given further opportunities for a miserable jaunt by these two books. The perspective of both might, not long ago, have been described as *marxisant*; but even that now overstates the residual theoretical cohesion of those who, in PC-speak, are clearly so ideologically challenged.

But there are two key developments from what has gone before. Thompson and Elliott exhibit and describe them in contrasting modes. The former uses a rather flat and pedestrian historical narrative sporadically enlivened by sentences of revelatory banality ("it is a wholly respectable argument that, to achieve anything in the British political system, office is a necessary condition"); the latter a historico-philosophical discourse of elaborate ironies and dazzling pirouettes ("that which does not exist cannot, by definition, expire") that some may feel grates into a supercilious cleverdickery. Notwithstanding such differences, it is their interpretative agreement on two fronts that is most interesting and significant.

First, there is the shared funerealism, not just of their titles but of their analysis. However, this is no longer confined merely to the familiar postmortems on labourism (death by parliamentarism and economism, causing progressive debility and degeneration). Now it also extends to the familiar socialist project in its relation to labourism. This project turns out to have been a "fantasy" (Thompson), with socialism falling off any recognisable agenda and reduced to "a pastiche of the poetry of the past" (Elliott).

But hang on a minute. Here we are being told that labourism failed even to become social democratic by the kind of voices which only yesterday defined the key political task for the left as the need to go "beyond" social democracy—and which reserved particular theoretical pity and political scorn for those who naively believed that the task was to social-democratise Labour (and, in recent times, to enable it to withstand the depredations of a resurgent right).

Having misread and organised against what had to be done then, it's a bit rich and shameless of such voices to announce now—without a trace of *mea culpa*—that there is nothing visible "beyond" social democracy after all, to castigate Labour for its inability even to become social democratic, and to offer a tepid attachment to the construction of a social-democratic Europe as the only plausible strategy. Thompson still finds a vacuous socialist "potential" amid the ruins, but Elliott knows that "waxing rhetorical about radiant new dawns for socialism is part of the problem, and not part of the solution".

Perhaps it is unfair to make Gregory Elliott a representative figure. But he does rather ask for it. I am happy to join the gravedigging party for Old Labourism; but only if I can explore the infirmities of some versions of New Leftism too. It's all part of the problem.

Now to the second common theme. The left has discoverd politics, albeit a bit late in the day. In particular, it has discovered the British state and constitution and has attached itself to a project of political reform. How and why this has happened is a complex story, involving high theory (as in the new theorists of citizenship), low politics (as in the reaction to Thatcherism), historical analysis of the British state form (as with Nairn and Anderson) and democratic retrieval (as with Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams). Whatever the sources, there have been two clear consequences.

The first is that analysis of the disabilities of British labourism now puts its attachment to the inherited institutions of the British state right at the centre. The modalities of this critique of "parliamentarism" are sharply different from Ralph Miliband's a generation ago. However, despite offering this as their organising framework, neither of these books really integrates it with the historical narrative in a way that would explain why *this* feature of labourism caused all the trouble.

Instead—the second consequence—we have a leap into prescription, in the shape of a political project of constitutional reform and radical democratisation. This is the primacy of politics with a vengeance, almost an old kind of determinism turned upside down.

Now, there is a certain disreputable pleasure (at least for a weary social democrat) in observing such a dénouement of a tradition: all that theoretical and political ambition ending in an embrace of Charter 88, espousal of a Lib-Lab pact and a forlorn attachment to the beleaguered margins of European social democracy. But it leaves a whole range of questions and connections hanging in the air.

Above all, there is an uncomfortable feeling that this left has opted for constitutional reform as the only show in town. There is a further uncomfortable feeling that its embrace of political reform has a certain instrumental quality to it. Is this what Elliott means when he portentously declares that "Her Majesty's subjects will one day have to be 'citizens' if they are ever to become 'comrades'"? Certainly, his sneering account of Labour's own constitutional changes (creating a "passive, de-politicised individual membership . . . dwarfing a residue of political activists, they would ratify by postal ballot, in the privacy of their own homes") does not suggest an unproblematic embrace of the democratic agenda. So watch out Charter 88.

But Elliott does pass on one magnificent student howler, for which almost everything else may be overlooked. If only Hobbes really had depicted life without the state as "solitary, poor, nasty, British, and short".

Tony Wright is Labour MP for Cannock. His book "Citizens and Subjects" will be published this month by Routledge

China bugs

THE IRON TREE
Martin Booth
Simon & Schuster, £14.99

Ruth Pavey

"The Iron Tree only flowers every hundred years. Unless a good man is about to die. Last week . . . there was a flower upon the tree." Near the waterfront in Hong Kong, in a street of fortune tellers, two elderly men are sitting down for a glass of tea. Although Stephen Galvin has not asked to hear his fortune, Mr Ng tells him anyway. Citing the iron tree as proof, he assured the ex-missionary priest that he will soon die.

More for love of reason than from fear of death, Galvin argues with him; that it may be indeed a century since the tree last flowered, that his own goodness is disputable, that there must be other good men who will also die soon. None of this touches Mr Ng. He knows for whom the tree is flowering.

So, as it happens, does Galvin, and so does the reader. This novel makes frequent leaps between 1900 and its own present, 1961. At its heart is the process of an old, childless man reviewing his life, disposing of his worldly goods, appointing a successor. Although a chalice is involved, it is not Christianity that Galvin wishes to pass on. Instead, it is a strain of the China bug.

We see the bug pass on from one receptive host to another. Mr Doble, an English mer-

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"Respectable" Hong Kong Chinese in the tea-house (rather than the opium den); in Frank Welsh's authoritative and absorbing "History of Hong Kong" (HarperCollins, £25)

chant elderly in 1900, is in part responsible for its safe haven in Father Stephen Galvin. In a key early encounter, he confirms Galvin's growing sense that: "In China is all of humanity, all we, as a species, are." Galvin soon recognises that, although he came to convert the Chinese to Christianity, it is he who is being converted away from it.

Then, in 1961, the successor presents himself, in the form of a 17-year-old English schoolboy, Andrew. Andrew comes to Galvin's tenement flat to learn Cantonese. Persuaded by the fact that he pays for his own lessons and shares Galvin's fondness for The Black Pussy Bar and Nite Club, Galvin decides that the boy, too, has become "committed to China". At the end of the novel he gives him his diary for the year 1900, thus passing on secrets he has kept for 60 years.

The story contained in the diary—of the horrible repression of Christianity at the time of the Boxer rebellion, the roots of Galvin's uneasy conscience and of his disenchantment with God—has gradually been told to the reader. It makes sense of the crustiness and reserve that so puzzles Triad boss Mr Yee, Sister Joseph, benign Mr Chan the antique dealer, Sam Kwan, keeper of the Black Pussy, and many more of the characters with whom the old "pale ghost" surrounds himself.

This is the sort of novel that could only have been written by an insider. Martin Booth grew up in Hong Kong, and writes as though he remembers every snake restaurant and back alley the place has to offer, and every intonation of pidgin English. Besides being thoughtful and moving, the book also excels as an example of the most endearing, personal sort of travel writing.

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Churchill in 1940, from Len Deighton's "Blood, Tears and Folly: in the darkest hours of the second world war" (Jonathan Cape, £20). Future readers may well think of Deighton less as a spy writer, more as a gifted popular historian. The latest chunk of his wartime narrative takes the story from the Battle of the Atlantic to Pearl Harbour

Fight games

A HISTORY OF WARFARE
John Keegan
Hutchinson, £20

Geoff Dyer

In his first book, John Keegan forged a new way of writing military history. *The Face of Battle* sought to convey the actual experience of those who fought in three battles—Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme—in extreme close-up, in more detail and in sharper focus than ever before. In his latest book, he has pulled back to attempt a vast panning shot that takes in the entire history of conflict.

The scale of this undertaking becomes apparent when you realise that war breaks out in 1939 with fewer than 20 pages of the main text remaining. Or, to make the same point the opposite way, it is only after devoting 360 pages to the principal ways in which people have sought to harm each other that Keegan arrives at the conflagration that occupied him for the duration of his last book, *The Second World War*.

This structural proportioning is necessitated by the grim fact that we've been going at it hammer and tongs—or with anything else that came to hand—practically from the moment we crawled out of the slime. Exactly why is difficult to pin down. Keegan steers a judicious course between scientists who claim that men are innate aggro merchants and those who, like the signatories of the Seville Statement of 1986, deny that we have inherited "from our animal ancestors" any biological propensity for violence.

Either way, Keegan argues persuasively, the history of the world is a history of fighting. It is also, of course, a history of cooperation, since conflicts could not have assumed the proportions they have without brothers, neighbours, friends or fellow countrymen—through ties of blood, geography or ideology—getting stuck in, offering support or pledging allegiance. The gang fight, one could be forgiven for thinking, probably offers the best paradigm of human activity.

The traditional Bank Holiday set-tos in Brighton are particularly reminiscent of the kind of highly ritualised encounters Keegan describes as taking place in some primitive societies. Despite their overt savagery, the idea of these battles is not to annihilate the enemy but to guarantee mutual co-existence with relatively little loss of visible blood.

Such a balance is not indefinitely sustainable. The book's narrative is provided by the ways in which one form of waging war—with its attendant technological innovations—conveys an overwhelming superiority to a certain group. Anticipating the *Blitzkrieg*, the speed and mobility first of the Assyrian charioteers and then of the horse people of the steppes—Hell's Angels, in the gangish analogy—enabled them to spread terror across vast tracts of land for thousands of years.

At this and many other points, Keegan's narrative chimes with memories of some of my earliest brushes with matters martial. If I read with fascination the pages detailing the blood-boltered rise of the Mongol leader Genghis Khan, it was because of a bedrock of curiosity laid down by the film starring (unless I am mistaken) Omar Sharif.

Classes in junior school about siege machines and vats of burning oil spilling down castle walls provided the foundations for my interest in his sections on the development of fortifications. His pages on the Roman hoplites appealed because of a phalanx of filmic epics whose names are legion. Toy crusaders provoked my initial interest in his account of the confrontation between Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages . . .

At times my early grounding wasn't enough to support the enormous weight of information brought to bear in each section (I've always had a blind spot about muskets and the development of gunpowder, for example), but this determinedly personal reading illustrates, I hope, the sustaining quality of Keegan's work. In a telling aside, he responds contemptuously to an academic tendency whereby "accessible" is "confused with shallowness" and is used as "an adjective of contempt". *A History of Warfare* is a work of massive erudition that, while making no intellectual concessions, makes available a wealth of knowledge and insight—a lifetime's, in fact—to fellow-expert and general reader alike.

Despite the atrocious evidence of millennia, Keegan's conclusions are guardedly optimistic. In a passage characteristically denuded of any gestures towards idealism or pacifism, he observes that war "may well be ceasing to commend itself to human beings as a desirable or productive, let alone rational, means of reconciling their discontents". One's instinctive reaction is to claim that the nightly evidence from Bosnia disproves such a conclusion. In fact it substantiates it.

Geoff Dyer's new novel, "The Search", is published next month by Hamish Hamilton

Born again

ISOLINA
Dacia Maraini, translated by Sian Williams
Peter Owen, £14.99

Michèle Roberts

At the heart of this book is a murder so atrocious that I had nightmares after reading about it. Dacia Maraini's powerful and sensitively created investigation shows her widening her scope even further as a writer, employing the cinematic description of *The Silent Duchess* (her previous bestseller) married to the left-wing and feminist sympathies of earlier novels such as *The Train* to produce a work of unforgettable impact.

Not a novel, yet unashamed of imaginative speculation, *Isolina* proceeds in a modernist fashion. It displays the way it has been constructed and the reasons for this. The author casts herself as the narrator in order to discover another woman's story, and perhaps finish it for her. She becomes a journalist, trying to discover the truth and finding out how hard that is. She takes swipe after swipe at her subject, coming at it from different angles, following tangles of clues, going off at tangents and into dead-ends.

In the end, she circles back to the beginning: a woman has been murdered, brutally hacked into pieces, and her murderer escapes scot-free. But in the re-telling of this outrage, this tragedy, she lets us put together a pretty good idea of whodunit and why. It's a beautifully reparative book, restoring to the dead woman some dignity and to the dismembered corpse some wholeness. Rather than feeling like a voyeur, the reader becomes a mourner.

In January 1900, a bloody bundle was washed up on the shores of the river Adige in Verona. Inside it were the butchered remains of a young woman. Further bundles provided other parts of her body, including the evidence of her pregnancy. Even later, her head was discovered. The body was identified as that of Isolina Canuti, a young woman living locally, with a reputation for being carefree, generous, pleasure-loving, and, some said, promiscuous. This bad reputation, it turns out, was carefully fostered by key players in the drama, acting as a mask that shielded the

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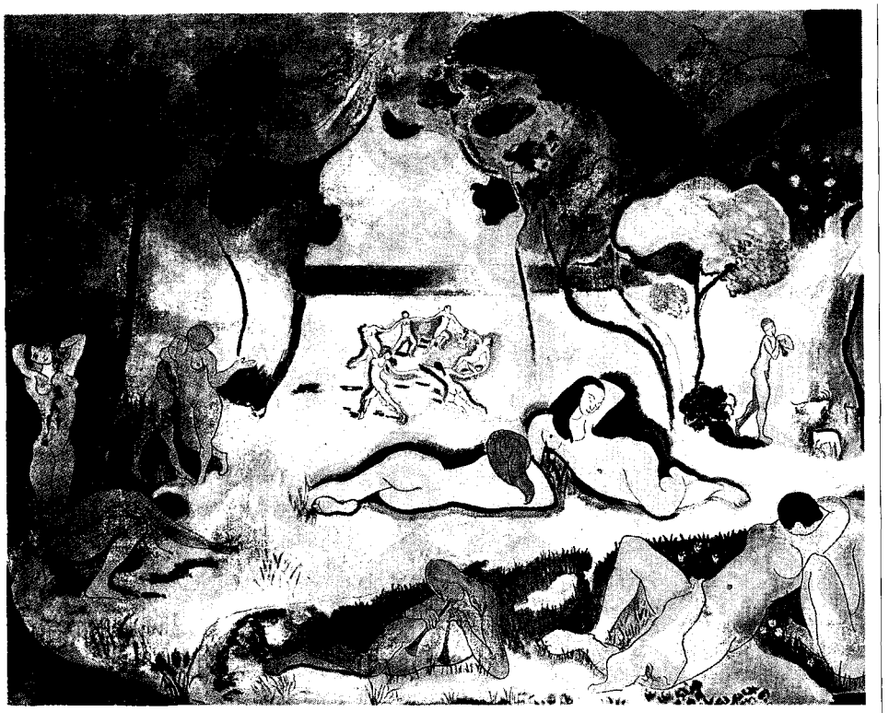

Henri Matisse's "The Joy of Life", in "Great French Paintings from the Barnes Foundation" (Little, Brown, £40). Dr Alfred Barnes' legendary but (until now) hidden collection of works from Manet to Picasso is at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris to 2 January

perpetrators of her murder.

Maraini's careful and fascinating re-reading of the contemporary newspapers' accounts of the trial that ensued shows how easily injustice could be done to a poor working-class girl when powerful institutions such as the army were involved. Isolina's officer lover protested his innocence of her killing to the last and was believed by nearly everybody.

The book's thrillerish format kept me eagerly reading, despite shudders, to the end. The past came so close: Dacia Maraini, combing present-day Verona for clues, was able to walk where Isolina walked, to stand in the street outside the building where the grisly murder took place, to touch the walls and bridges and shop doors that Isolina touched.

There is something very affecting in these accounts of *a real life* that ended much too soon. The experiences and words of poor women are so often unrecorded in the history books, popping up only as examples of transgression in the discourses of the legal process. Yet Isolina's life haunts this book, emerging strongly in the reported anecdotes of her friends. She makes zabaglione for her lover, orders a lace-trimmed bodice from the dressmaker to wear in bed with him, hugs a warming-pan in her lap, confides she doesn't want an abortion.

All these years later, she is listened to again, heard again. But at the core of the book, we hear her screams, flinch at her terror and pain.

Michèle Roberts' stories, "During Mother's Absence", are published next week by Virago

In word and deed

A PRICE BELOW RUBIES: JEWISH WOMEN AS REBELS AND RADICALS
Naomi Shepherd
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £25

Ruth Brandon

When my grandfather heard I was going to university, he said: "It's not a good idea. She'll get a mind of her own. It's not a good thing in a woman."

Too late. But I could laugh because in 20th-century England his opinion (at least on this subject) was of no consequence. Had I been born, like both my grandmothers, in some Ukrainian *shtetl*, I should not have laughed. My fate would have been theirs: an arranged marriage at 16, to a man I did not much like, who spent his life studying the books denied to me; whom I should be expected to support and respect, whose children I should have to bear, and who would view me as in every way inferior to himself.

Naomi Shepherd's subjects escaped into radicalism because they saw what their mothers' lives were, and refused to contemplate the "kosher bed" for themselves. They were an extraordinary and violent lot. Their implacability perhaps reflected the emotional violence they inflicted on themselves when first they broke the bond that chained them to their families and communities.

Six of Shepherd's seven subjects—Anna Kuliscioff, Rosa Luxemburg, Esther Frumkin, Manya Shochat, Rose Pesotta and Emma Goldman—were from this background. The seventh, Bertha Pappenheim, is perhaps better known as Sigmund Freud's "Anna O". Her culture was German and she had (famously) her own problems. But she, too, suffered from rabbinic law's proscription of female intellect.

All these women revolutionised their own lives in order to work for the wider revolution. Some were terrorists with the Russian "People's Will"; some were socialists; some were anarchists.

Their stories are replete with excitement and melodrama. Kuliscioff became the founding mother of Italian socialism; Shochat became a Zionist (and had so terrifying a reputation that Ben Gurion refused to meet with her alone). The privations they took in their stride are almost unimaginable: repeated imprisonment, exile, rootlessness. Principle and the cause always took precedence over their emotional lives.

But they were not man-haters. Rather, their protest was against the unfair distribution of power in the personal sphere as much as the political. What they wanted had never been on offer: an equal partnership of minds as well as bodies. This ideal is still hard to attain. Then, it was unheard of. But they would accept nothing less.

Many of these women are already well-known to socialist and feminist historians. But Naomi Shepherd, setting them in the background they so vehemently rejected, enables us to see these extraordinary lives from a new angle. What is the purpose of biography if not to probe under the overt action for the real and often covert agenda?

Shepherd's book is at its best when she does this least equivocally. Her examination of Rosa Luxemburg is wonderfully interesting, and it throws an entirely new light on the roots of her politics. The woman who emerges here is very different from Luxemburg as she liked to present herself.

Group biography is a very difficult form. The danger is that it will degenerate into a list. If this is not to happen, the linking ideas must be very strong, so that they dominate and dictate the shape of the book—strong enough to offset the indigestible, inevitable plethora of names and information. Where she allows herself to theorise most, Shepherd is most successful.

The other danger is that the authorial tone, spread over many lives, will tend to diminish the subjects' individuality. With so much to be crammed into each chapter, the temptation is to paraphrase such bulky items as letters and diaries. Nevertheless, the way to bring people to life is to use their own words where possible. Exceptional lives are more than a series of exceptional deeds: we want to know the people inside those deeds.

There are tantalising moments when a sentence or two of correspondence is quoted. We need more, much more. The result might have been a longer book, but an even more interesting one.

Ruth Brandon's "The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini" is published this month by Secker & Warburg

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Regular guy

MILLROY THE MAGICIAN
Paul Theroux
Hamish Hamilton, £15.99

Douglas Kennedy

"My name is Millroy and I am a messenger. I was once so fat I was imprisoned in the darkness of my body—trapped in my own fatness. Every day was living hell, and I suffered just like you. But the Lord spoke to me saying, 'Change your ways, fatso!' I was reborn and aassumed the shape of this body you see before you."

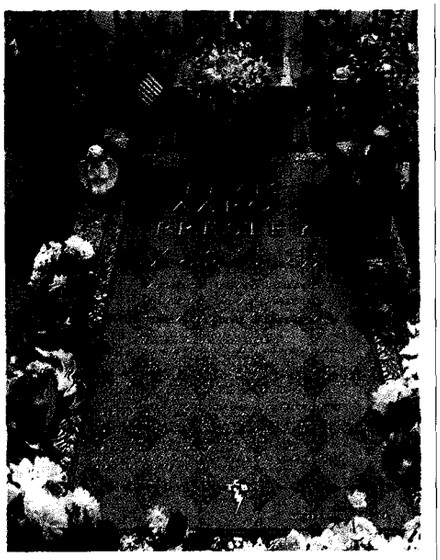
To anyone familiar with the bizarre frontiers of born-again American Christianity, this "testimonial" from Paul Theroux's terrific new novel, *Millroy the Magician*, probably sounds like some absurd parody of televangelistic hard-sell. After all, though the Jimmy Swaggerts and Jim Bakkers promised anyone two box seats in heaven in exchange for cold cash, they surely didn't offer their flock divine intervention when it came to shedding a few pounds from their torso?

Well, actually . . . they did. Because many a televangelist peddled Son-of-Man SlimFast programmes, where putting your faith in the love of Jesus would undoubtedly stop you from eating three Big Macs and five Mars Bars at lunchtime. And when I toured the American south in the summer of 1988, researching my book about the Christian fundamentalist movement (*In God's Country*), I did spend a day observing a Christian weight-watching clinic on the campus of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa. A quintet of exceptionally corpulent souls joined hands and asked God for the strength to resist wolfing down that pint of Haagen-Dazs-and-cream before bedtime.

So there's absolutely nothing far-fetched about Millroy—Theroux's latest evangelical madman on a mission to debunk the gimcrackery of American life—when he announces to his vast small-screen audience that he has the spiritual/dietary answer to constipation. He can ensure that all citizens open their bowels: "I can make America regular again."

Millroy is no mere advocate of spiritual high-fibre. He's also a professional conjurer who graduates from food-oriented sleights-of-hand in a New England carnival to national prominence as a diet-obsessed televangelical cult leader with his very own set of acolytes (The Sons and Daughters), his hour-of-power television show (The Day One Programme) and even his very own chain of spiritually correct restaurants (The Day One Diners). And Millroy assures his flock that if they follow his regime, not only will their bowels open with startling regularity, but they will also live for 200 years.

"His bowels got into the newspapers," says Jilly, the waif-like young girl whom Millroy adopts as a side-kick and then transforms into his long-lost son (an intriguing bit of evangelical cross-dressing). "His bowels got into



The King is dead . . . perhaps. The tomb (if it is one) at Graceland, from Chet Flippo's room-by-room, relic-by-relic official guide to America's most sacred place of pilgrimage ("Graceland", Mitchell Beazley, £19.99)

magazines, people called the diner asking about his bowels, photographers showed up asking about Millroy's picture. Even though he would not talk to the press and refused to pose for pictures, the programme racked up more viewers. He knew they were people who hoped he would talk about his bowels again, which he did . . . "

Millroy, however, is no outlandish cult monster, no graduate of the Jim Jones/David Koresh school of pious kamikaze pilot, even though he is eventually exposed as a first-class fraud. Rather, he puts one in mind of Charlie Fox, the misguided visionary "hero" of Theroux's best novel to date, *The Mosquito Coast*. Fox flees the fast-food ethos of 1980s America and attempts to build his own little new-fangled promised land in the Central American bush.

Millroy is yet another utopia merchant: someone who preaches a doctrine of organic rebirth in a society gorging itself to death on synthetic crap. But Theroux is canny enough to avoid turning this companion-piece to his earlier novel into a blatant satire on the grotesqueness of American consumerism and religious charlatanism. Rather, *Millroy the Magician* is a tautly crafted exploration of that most dangerous of American pastimes: personal reinvention.

Theroux—a New Englander, born in the state where the doctrine of social and spiritual perfectibility tested in the New World—has written yet another bleaky funny allegory about a society desperately in search of a panacea that will cure its multiple ills. Life, liberty and the pursuit of unblocked colon: what more do you want from a country?

Douglas Kennedy's "Chasing Mammon" is now a Flamingo paperback. His novel, "The Dead Heart", will be published by Little, Brown in June

New poetry

Bucking the market

David Herd

The third Paladin "re-active" anthology, *the tempers of hazard* (£7.99), reprints selections from the poetry of **Thomas A Clark**, **Barry MacSweeney** and **Chris Torrance**. For the past 25 years, these poets have published their work in small presses and fugitive magazines. The decision to restrict themselves to such forms of distribution has signified a reluctance to enter into certain kinds of literary transaction. Thus MacSweeney observes of Torrance: "There is no feeling of the poems having been rushed, like battery hens, to meet some invisible demand . . . In no way are we merely accommodated—just 'what we bargained for'."

MacSweeney's polemical case is that Torrance does not have to make easy intellectual and poetic deals because his poetry is not shaped by the invisible demand, or hand, of the market. This being, for MacSweeney, the hand that feeds poets operating through mainstream publishers.

So for Clark, MacSweeney and Torrance, to appear in an imprint of the corporate publisher HarperCollins must represent a concession. But if the poets give ground, so too does the publisher. The Paladin format is alert to the virtues of small-press presentation. This book does carry a blurb, but one which deliberately avoids hyperbole. The description of the poets as "hired guns in a range war" depends on, more than it determines, a reading of the poetry. The book also declares itself conscious of its own cultural significance, with the lower-case title gesturing a resistance to "capitalisation".

Thus *the tempers of hazard* constitutes a carefully negotiated settlement between opposing parties, and so draws attention to what is most positive about each poet. The poets differ markedly in matters of style. What they share is a determination to write poetry at a critical distance from contemporary economic and political life, but while resisting the allure of a Romantic retreat from the fray.

This is a precarious line to tread, demanding concentration and self-discipline. Clark, perhaps, is the most consistently attentive. His poetry is always in motion, as the poet walks through the Gloucestershire countryside. It is typically serial in form, and as each new informative line carries the same weight as any other, so the sense is of a "succession of moments/each one solid and discrete".

Occasionally, this method reduces to a simple celebration of its rural setting, but what Clark constantly works to represent is a context in which each constituent is separately defined, but in which all are mutually supportive. Clark is diligent and unrelenting in pursuit of this exacting poetic ideal, and so

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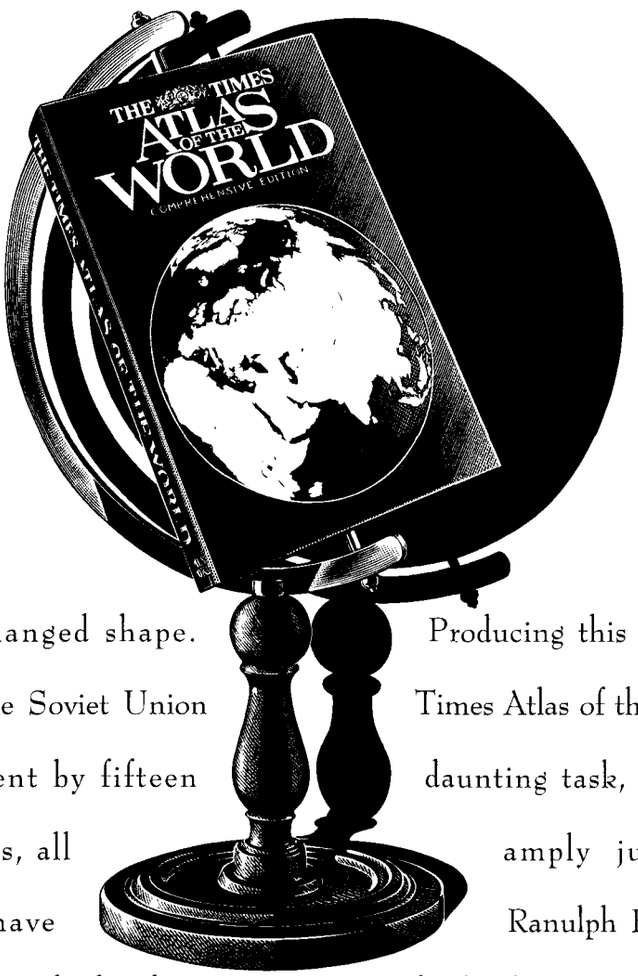
The shape of our world today.



The world has changed shape. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and its replacement by fifteen independent states, all existing atlases have become obsolete. Hundreds of places have changed their names and new republics have emerged in former Yugoslavia.

Producing this stunning new Times Atlas of the World was a daunting task, but has been amply justified. Sir Ranulph Fiennes hailed the book as "a masterpiece of presentation and research, the ultimate in coffee table decoration and an invaluable reference."

Comprehensive Edition £85.00	Family Edition £16.99
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THE TIMES ATLAS
New Atlases for a New World

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convinces the reader of his human claim that we must live "in a community of interest", and that "we need each other/and a space in which to speak". The net effect is a spirit of thrillingly circumspect optimism.

At one point in *Soft City*, his study of 1970s London, Jonathan Raban lists the books in a typical Notting Hill flat: "*The Macrobiotic Way, The I-Ching* . . . poems by . . . Barry MacSweeney, Blake and Leonard Cohen". This tells a certain truth about MacSweeney. For a time in the mid-1970s, his poetry appeared to take refuge in post-Beat drug imagery, the liberation of which was pitched against domesticity: "tiny sparklets/of optimism along the sea-/gas pipes, can a reliable plumber be found".

Perhaps MacSweeney never altogether dismissed the utility of a "reliable plumber". Certainly, his poetry before and after this period engages the world of work. His carefully cut-up poem "Brother Wolf" takes Chatterton's life as a focus for a critical study of poets who "neglect the ordinary means of/acquiring competence and independence". MacSweeney has developed this theme into a distinctive poetic practice. His recent "state of the nation bulletins", learn from and interrogate his workaday experience as a journalist, and by their sustained outrage make a case for poetry as reportage.

Torrance, too, has considered the working life of the poet, most notably in the early volume *Green Orange Purple Red*. Circulating around the suburban centres of south London, he draws quiet attention to the way the city works, noticing the fact of "immaculate lawns & shitstrewn verges" but never losing sight of the pleasure of "cruising for a record". That said, he left the city to settle in south Wales. Here he has attuned his language to the social and geological history of the region, not in a search for alternative lifestyles, but in recognition of the fact that there are and have been other ways of organising the world.

Carol Ann Duffy is best known for the much-anthologised "Poet for Our Times", her racy representation of the tabloid headline writer's art that prompts the editors of Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry* to note her "feminist, public voice". But like many poets who make it as public speakers, Duffy is anxious to show that her poetry has a private life. *Mean Time* (Anvil Press, £6.95) catches both tones, wistful and drifting, yet aware of the harshness of the period.

There are a number of poems about loss here, and only one or two, notably "Prayer", make the theme their own. More successful still are the poems that work through and against the idioms of a soulless culture, where "the long afternoon empties of air, meaning, energy, point".

Initially criticised for lack of ambition, **Selima Hill** is now displaying the real reach of her poetry. *A Little Book Of Meat* (Bloodaxe Books, £6.95) is the monologue of a young woman experiencing her first affair. The woman is Catholic and the adjective informs every nuance of her voice, the poetry moving from an inhibited, self-questioning line, to a joyful, ecclectic, metaphoric revelling. The collection's value lies in the detail in which it documents the rhetorical shaping of a mind.

Finally, the new poems in **Paul Durcan**'s *A Snail In My Prime* (Harvill, £7.99) are as reflexive as ever. The poet appears in the third person, and the enigmatic poems constantly draw the reader back into their world. Terry Eagleton has hinted that this is postmodern, but perhaps Durcan, a poet in the oral tradition, just likes the sound of his own voice. Not altogether a bad thing for such an instinctively lyrical poet, but readers have to be prepared simply to listen.

Holy fool

THE VICAR OF SORROWS
A N Wilson
Sinclair-Stevenson, £14.99

Mary Loudon

It may be unorthodox to begin a review by mentioning an author's looks, but it has never ceased to intrigue me that A N Wilson's clipped and tweedy exterior, which is heavily suggestive of prep school conservatism and order, conceals a writer whose continuing obsession is religious confusion and emotional chaos. His latest novel concerns the spiritual and emotional roller-coaster on which the protagonist, Francis Kreer, suddenly finds himself after years of the same old clerical/marital merry-go-round.

A middle-aged Anglican clergyman, whose life and attitude towards it have been soured by an unhappy marriage and a profound loss of faith, Francis Kreer has a particularly bad Christmas. He loses his elderly mother and with it the last vestiges of his belief; he discovers that she has left half her estate to a hitherto-unmentioned lover called Eric; and he falls in love with a 20-year-old musical hippy, who is camping in his village. Then he goes rapidly and convincingly round the bend.

It sounds silly—and indeed *The Vicar of Sorrows* has its less plausible aspects—but Wilson always has been a novelist of odd and bold plots. And while these slightly fantastical tendencies are irritating, there is always adequate compensation, for Wilson's real talent lies in characterisation; in his eye for physical and emotional detail, and his ear for dialogue. His strength lies in depicting the interior world of human beings, the dynamics of their relationships, and—most often—the clash between the two.

The clash in this case occurs most forcibly when Francis finds his emotions taking over from his will, and driving him, quite literally, to self-destruction. This is a theme as old as love itself, containing much pain and paradox, but also a surprising amount of warmth and humour.

Wilson has a reputation for spikiness, but there is a strangely benevolent quality to *The Vicar of Sorrows*, a sympathy for even its most pathetic characters, which suggests that the author has begun to come to terms with not only his own much-publicised loss of faith, but with his own failures and weaknesses. I say this largely because I doubt that anyone who had never gone off the rails could write so poignantly about the sort of breakdown and depression described in the early part of this book, nor the inevitable hopelessness of a love affair founded on mutual crisis. Neither, I imagine, could the never-bereaved write quite so piercingly of the unremitting agony of loss, and of the way in which it incarcerates the sufferer and alienates the comforter:

"Over the whisky, the Wing-Co wanted to tell Francis that he had been through something of the sort when his first wife died, but that the amazing thing about the human spirit was its resilience: people survived; they survived even the Nazi death-camps, or the most agonising and humiliating medical treatment. These words of kindness died on the old man's lips. All he said was, 'Well—same time, same place?'"

Wilson writes brilliantly about non-communication, particularly non-communication between men; and his prose is built so slowly and carefully that a missed opportunity for confrontation or conciliation between characters can seem almost tragic. Nothwithstanding this, however, is the impression that for all his insights into the lonely psyches of weak men, Wilson does not much like—or at least understand—real women. This is a grave deficiency, and it slightly diminishes an otherwise powerful novel.

Mary Loudon's "Unveiled: nuns talking" is published by Vintage (£5.99)

House rules

IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS: MEMOIRS
Helen Suzman
Sinclair-Stevenson, £17.99
ETHNICITY AND POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA
Gerhard Mare
Zed Books, £10.95 paperback/29.95 hardback

Victoria Brittain

Helen Suzman, an opposition member of parliament in South Africa for 35 years and for 13 of them the only representative of sanity and principle in the chamber, was a powerful voice against injustice through three decades of repression of the black majority. She was a witness as parliament pushed through the complete distortion of the rule of law with the Ninety Day Detention Act, the Terrorism Act and the Sabotage Act; and with the Bantu Education Act, the Urban Areas Act and the creation of the tri-cameral parliament, among other measures, created the conditions the authorities believed would keep power

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Peter Magubane's picture of the funeral of a demonstrator killed by police in Soweto, from his "Women of South Africa: their fight for freedom" (Little, Brown, £16.99)

forever in the hands of whites.

As she put it herself in a report to her constituents in 1970: "I seem to have become the honorary ombudsman for all those people who have no vote and no MP—they write to me in their hundreds asking for help . . . I get dozens of pathetic letters that are smuggled out of gaol, and many appeals for help from banned people. Sometimes I manage to get conditions alleviated—often not. But my desk here and in Cape Town is a sad harvest of the seeds of apartheid."

She includes dozens of tributes to herself from many journalists and activists across the political spectrum, from the young blacks at Steve Biko's funeral and Winnie Mandela to the Queen. She even includes the remark by Andrew Young, Jimmy Carter's ambassador to the UN, that she was the only South African he couldn't get along with because he could not stand "paternal liberalism", and follows it up with an account of how he was persuaded into a carefully phrased withdrawal.

The incident is one of many that reveal how her phenomenal hard work and sharp tongue were matched by ego. And perhaps it is partly the ego that makes these memoirs, of a momentous period of history, rather dull. In addition, as she tells it, parliament was the centre of Helen Suzman's world. She used its privileges as best she could, visiting prisons, interceding with ministers for the displaced or the tortured, raising the state murders of Steve Biko and Neil Aggett. But, for most South Africans parliament was utterly irrelevant, and these memoirs give no feel for the drama of the times outside it.

Towards the end of the book, the confident note changes into a querulous bitterness. She never forgave the resignations from parliament in 1986 of her colleagues in the Progressive Federal Party, Frederic Van Zyl Slabbert and Alex Boraine, who came to believe that only extra-parliamentary political work made any sense in South Africa. It was too late for Helen Suzman to change with the moment of history, and her final political years were marred by the bitter antagonism she aroused in the rising Mass Democratic Movement, the Commonwealth, and others, with her strong anti-sanctions stance. She believed that sanctions spelt ruin for the South African economy and, in her speeches abroad, became an important voice for the regime she had criticised for so long.

After so many years of living inside the system, hers was not the character that could make the break from the golf club and the dinners with the British ambassador to become part of the democratic movement that had grown strong outside it, at a high price. The great white opponents of apartheid, such as the Afrikaner churchman Beyers Naude, Ruth First, Joe Slovo and Bram Fischer, rejected their class and ethnic background. They put their lives on the line day after day for majority rule. Helen Suzman's memoirs give not a whiff of that heroic world.

Gerhard Mare's modest little book sheds more light on the underlying levers of the power-struggle in South Africa, with his devastating analysis of Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha movement as a tool of ethnic politics used by the white regime. Suzman, a friend of Buthelezi's in the 1970s, though alienated by the scandals of his state funding that became public knowledge nearly 20 years later, still writes of him as "a key figure in the negotiations for the new South Africa . . . leader of the largest ethnic group in the country and a skilful and experienced politician".

It is a breathtaking legitimation, and a judgment that illustrates better than any other how 35 years in the South African parliament is apt to cut you off from the realities of your country.

Victoria Brittain is assistant foreign editor of "the Guardian"

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Otter king

GAVIN MAXWELL: A LIFE
Douglas Botting
HarperCollins, £22.50

Fraser Harrison

It is often the fate of biographers to see their subject reviewed at the expense of their book, so let it be said straightaway that this account of Gavin Maxwell could hardly be bettered. At 570 pages, it is long, but not one of them is wasted, and the sustained acquaintanceship they provide gives an eerie sense of closeness to Maxwell's compelling and disturbing personality—surely the sign of a first-rate biography?

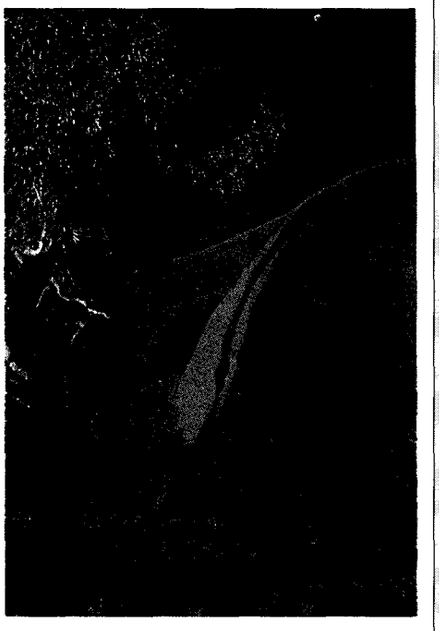
Douglas Botting is equipped with the indispensable advantage of having known Maxwell and of having shared his dream. Indeed, he even borrowed it, since he was briefly caretaker to Maxwell's Scottish house and his otter menagerie at Sandaig, or Camusfeàrna as it was known to the *two million* buyers of *A Ring of Bright Water*. Despite his close friendship, Botting has not been deceived by Maxwell's often bewitching charm, nor alienated by his sometimes offensive, paranoid and even treacherous behaviour. He knows his man well and has seen him plain; not an easy task, for as Botting comments: "Never has the simple life been pursued by so complex a character."

As a traveller and explorer himself, Botting shows a special identification with this side of Maxwell's life. He is also alert to his many paradoxes: the aristocrat who devoted much of his writing to peasants; the homosexual who married, albeit for only a year; the naturalist who never wrote a book of natural history; the seeker of freedom who turned his idyllic refuge into a virtual prison; the recluse who could not bear loneliness. If Botting is sometimes over-reticent when examining Maxwell's breakdowns—the product of what he calls "bi-polar illness", or manic depression—he furnishes sufficient data for the reader to draw his own conclusions.

Maxwell once confided that, between the ages of seven and ten, he was "wonderfully, gloriously happy". This era came to an end with his traumatic dispatch to prep school, and it is Botting's persuasive thesis that his emotional development remained frozen at that point. As a young man, he developed an infantile mania for killing, and like Darwin before him was driven by an insatiable desire to shoot game.

During the war, ill health prevented his fighting abroad but he became a star instructor with the SOE, teaching various forms of human stalking and sudden death. Later he went into business as a shark hunter, and turned the first of his island retreats into a bone yard. As in many other ways, he was redeemed from this phase of youth by his love affair (the phrase is apt) with his first otter, which prompted his later conservationism.

A more sophisticated strand of his infantilism was his need to travel—to run away.



Desert heart: Ayers Rock in Australia, pictured in the "Guinness Guide to Nature in Danger: threatened habitats and species" by Noel Simon (Guinness Publishing, £19.95)

Remote and primitive places offered the necessary conditions for his version of happiness, and this he occasionally found in the tundra, the Iraqi marshes (now destroyed by Saddam Hussein), Sicily and the Atlas mountains. As a traveller, he was a modern in the sense that he did not travel to study, conquer or convert, but to soothe his spirit.

Yet he did pay his dues by writing books, perhaps his finest, about the exploited and dispossessed in Italy and Morocco. In this day of profligate reprinting, there must be a publisher willing to give a new lease of life to his Sicilian book, *The Ten Pains of Death*.

But the boyhood dream he sought most passionately was that of an Avalon, his own kingdom where he could rule without challenge and live in tranquillity. The place proved to be Camusfeàrna, though the part of Guinevere was taken by an otter, his beloved and ill-fated Mij. What child has not fantasised about sharing his life and bed with a favourite pet? By his own admission, Maxwell felt more for Mij than he did for most human beings, and his extraordinary sales figures would appear to testify to a common longing for such an animal companion.

However, Maxwell was by no means indifferent to human company. Part of the joy of playing Arthur in Camusfeàrna was that he was served by a retinue of faithful knights, most of them young men, half-friends and half-employees, over whom he exercised a benign autocracy. In Avalon, he was king of the castle.

Botting's great achievement is to have looked his complicated friend square in the face, portraying his frailties while remaining loyal to his gifts. Above all, he has convincingly confirmed Maxwell's stature as a remarkable writer whose best books, not just his best-selling books, should be re-read.

PRINTOUT

Word power

Boyd Tonkin

"The history of the Russian and Soviet peoples in the 20th century is a bizarre, fantastic fable that could not have been invented by the wildest imagination." As I read that, the heroic defender of Russian liberty in August 1991 turned his tanks on the parliament. In Moscow's tragic pantomime of role-reversal, each new turn upstages the army of journalists who try to fix in print the chaos of post-communism.

While punditry fades in the light of tomorrow's headlines, poetry keeps its bloom. This year's most enduring book about Russia will be Yevgeny Yevtushenko's magnificent anthology of "Twentieth Century Russian Poetry" (edited by Albert C Todd and Max Hayward; Fourth Estate, £30). Its 1,000-plus pages close with a poem by Ilya Krichevsky, killed at the White House in 1991: "Still yet a long, long way to go,/still yet many who will lie in ditches . . . "

In a country where slim volumes of verse can sell out editions of 200,000 in a couple of days, poetry has never lost its direct line to the people's imagination. This epic compilation—830 poems and 253 authors—amounts to a history of the nation's inner life as well as a guided trek across schools, movements and ideologies. Yevtushenko's anti-Soviet foes often saw him as a Beatle-capped Kremlin stooge in dissident's clothing, but he also stood between the tanks and the parliament in 1991. He claims to have banished political bias from the selection, "because civil war in literature, like civil war itself, is fratricidal".

The normal roster of star names appears; from Blok, Akhmatova and Pasternak through to Brodsky and Akhmadulina. Even more rewarding is the chance to discover writers without western renown, such as the "absurdist" Daniil Kharms or the hugely popular bard Bulat Okudzhava. Reds and Whites, backwoods patriots and cosmopolitan emigrés; all nestle side-by-side in unusual harmony. And the works chosen prove that many of the greatest figures belonged only to the party of ambivalence.

In this, of all weeks, it's impossible to overlook the melancholy repetition of protests against bloodshed and autocracy. As another "Kremlin mountaineer" makes law from the barrels of tanks, we can turn to Osip Mandelstam's famous satire on Stalin, which hastened his arrest: "Like horseshoes he forges decree after decree—/Some get it in the forehead, some in the brow,/some in the groin and some in the eye".

From the twilight of the Romanovs to the implosion of Bolshevism, the poet's voice rises above the growl of violence and fear. This superb compendium gives hope that Russia's true opposition can survive even its new Tsar. As Nina Grachova (born 1971) writes: "It is not the whips' and cannons' power I revere,/ but the anguish of the land."

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Friday 5th November 1993

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VOLUNTEERS needed to join Defence Fund team. £5 paid for lunch and travel. Contact Nicola, tel: 071-739 3211.

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ENDGAMES: Weekend Competition

No 3297 Set by Margaret Rogers
We asked for haikus to encapsulate a scientific theory or a mini-biography of a famous scientist.

Report by Ms de Meaner
As usual, there were those who didn't know the rules governing the haiku form: which is three lines, with five syllables in the first and third lines, and seven in the second. And I'm still having no truck with the cross man who espostulated last time that his was a *modern* haiku. Since the haiku is, strictly speaking, also meant to mention a season, then throwing out that last remaining goal post would result in a mere vulgar free-for-all. So, sorry, Jay Lounaspuro *et al*, and better luck next time.

A lot of cheating went on, I noticed. Particularly impressive was Frank Munro, who substituted the word "whatnot" when the syllables of the correct word proved inappropriate. I was also lukewarm about some of Noel Petty's (the ones that didn't win). Here are two:

Fermat proved his Last
Theorem, but it wouldn't
Fit in a haiku.

And:

I'd do Heisenberg's
Uncertainty Principle,
But it's a bit vague.

Now, I'm all for being entertained, but neither of these *really* fitted the instructions, however hard I tried to make them. Nor did Leslie Sheeran's:

Marconi said: "So!
First came wireless—then telly—
Then Eldorado!"

We asked for mini-biogs of a scientist, not the mini-story of what happened after s/he invented what s/he did.

A fiver for each winning entry, and, to save his blushes, I won't mention Will Bellenger's valiant attempt at "Heidegger's Uncertainty Principle".

Copernicus showed
Ptolemy's epicycles
Were pi in the sky.

One good solar turn
Deserves anathema, learnt
Bold Galileo.
K G McBeath

Things always fell from
Trees, but only Newton's bump
On the head matters.
Dickon Abbott

Doppler: moving sounds
Shift their frequency when heard
By unmoving ears.

Mass multiplied by
Acceleration's free fall:
That is gravity.

Pythagoras found
Triangles' tidy laws made
His name eternal.
D A Prince

Newton's apple bonks
Your bonce—the gravity of
This can't be ignored.
Will Bellenger

Appropriately,
Alexander Graham Bell
Invented the phone.
R J Pickles

Hypotenuse squared
Equals the sum of the squares
On t'other two sides.

A rainbow consists
Of seven colours which, mixed,
Make purest white light.

Spit will transform starch
Into sugar: chew some bread,
Then suck it and see.
Eric Swainson

(Newton's Third Law of Motion)
To ev'ry action
Is always opposite and
Equal reaction.
Sid Field

Ohm's Law is about
Conductors' resistance, but
Not on the buses.
M E Ault

(Chaos theory)
A butterfly's wings
In Brazil can trigger a
Texan tornado.
Keith Norman

Sir Isaac Newton
Studied light, but gravity
Was his main burden.

The Doppler Effect
Means you can tell if the train
Is coming, or gone.
Katie Mallett

Archimedes found
That he was worth his weight in
His own bathwater.
Noel Petty

Galileo saw
That the earth moved round the sun
While the church stood still.
George Rees

GRYPH'S QUIZ

The answers all have something in common

1. Punctuation mark
2. Desire
3. Leon, originally
4. St Peter, notoriously
5. Beat
6. Sign
7. Palindromic female
8. Genuine
9. The Liberator
10. Luciferously proboscissed

Answers below

If Schrödinger's cat
Is in a closed box it is
Both dead and alive.

Enrico Fermi
Built the first atomic pile.
O Hiroshima!
Nick Wray

(Planck's Constant)
Kill infinities!
Energy's jerky, not smooth—
Comes in chunks called "h".

(Fractals)
Parsley is all stalk
Really—fragments remember
Their parent's wholeness.
Robin Oakley-Hill

(Freudian theory)
Angst-ridden by thoughts
Of snipped genitalia,
Young girls want willies.
Watson Weeks

Darwin's theory
Didn't arrive just like that;
It's still evolving.
Peter Norman

A neutrino spins
And has a mass of zero.
Give *me* a doughnut.
Jeremy Browne

No 3300 Set by Tim Hopkins
We would like you to send in a stately sonnet; the only stipulation being that it should be entirely devoid of meaning. Entries to be in by 21 October.

Quiz answers

All are units of currency, from 1) Costa Rica; 2) Japan; 3) Bulgaria; 4) France ; 5) UK; 6) Germany; 7) India; 8) Spain; 9) Venezuela; 10) Vietnam. NB: 3: Leon Trotsky né Lev Bronstein; 10: Edward Lear

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BACKCHAT

Mat Coward goes down Memory Lane, when Labour was to the left of the SDP

"Tell us, Uncle Clever," I am sometimes asked, in a nephewish sort of way, "just how long exactly have you been a member of the Labour Party?" More than half my lifetime, little ones, I reply; although—Dog's Tooth!—it feels more like a lifetime and a half. "And just exactly how long is that?" they demand. "Is it a very, very long time indeed?"

Is it a long time! Listen to me: I have been in the party for so long that I can remember when Dawn Primarolo was a left-winger. I have been in the party so long I can remember when John Edmonds was a right-winger. I can even remember when Margaret Beckett was a left-winger; and when she was a right-winger before that, and a left-winger before that, and a . . .

I have been in the party so long, I can remember when Denis Healey was an abominated monetarist monster. I can remember when Roy Hattersley was despised for his inflexible, reactionary views, and now look at him—despised for being a snobbish, pretentious hack who only fools himself with his born-again-radical-liberal act.

I have been in this party for so long, I can remember when Ken Livingstone and Paul Boateng were full-time representatives of the people. Of course, that was before they got elected to parliament, and gave up politics in favour of male modelling, but even so—I remember. I do, I remember.

I can remember a time when the big, fractious, violent, passionate centre-piece debates at annual conference weren't concerned with introspective trivia like tinkering with the method of selecting parliamentary candidates, but with the major issues of the moment, like tinkering with the method of selecting the parliamentary leader.

Um: oh well, OK then, I'm not quite old enough to remember conference getting excited about anything important, but I'm old enough to remember when scores of right-wing MPs and councillors and peers split from Labour, unable to stay in a party that they feared was only one step away from introducing a one member, one vote system for electing its leaders. They couldn't sanction such ultra-left anarchy; more to the point, they knew they couldn't survive it, either.

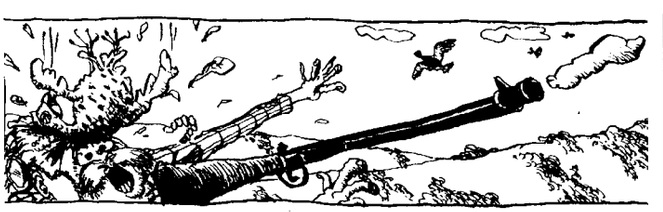
I've been in the party so long I can remember when Labour was to the left of the SDP. It was that, of course, which justified the existence of the SDP. And some of us thought it was that which justified the existence of the Labour Party.

So long, so very long, have I been in this party, that I can remember when Bennite plotters dreamt of a national executive committee on which women sat by right of quota—a quota that they knew would guarantee one more NEC seat for the hard left.

I have been in this party so long I can remember when it still opposed VAT on heating bills. Although, in fact, now you mention it, that was only a fortnight ago, wasn't it? All right then, how about this: I have been a member of this party for such an extraordinary length of time that I can remember when it opposed the privatisation of water. There: see, I knew you wouldn't believe me. And, no doubt, if I am a member for a few more months, I'll be able to boast: "I've been a member of this party so long that I can remember when it opposed the privatisation of British Rail."

I've been a member so long, I can remember when it formed governments. Good heavens—I have been a member of this party so long, I can remember when it still existed.

FORTEANA



Felix Bennett

More about cats (and elephants and seals) from **Paul Sieveking**

I was saddened to read, in a Tass report of 2 September, that Batyr the "talking elephant" had passed away in Kazakhstan. The elephant was famous in the city of Karaganda for producing sounds that approximated to Russian phrases. Keepers at the local zoo decided to enlarge his enclosure and, for safety reasons, tranquilised him with soporific drugs. They gave him too large a dose, and he never woke up.

Batyr first became famous in 1977 when a nightwatchman reported hearing the eight-year-old Indian elephant talking to himself. Zoo deputy director Boris Kosinsky was sceptical, but paid the pachyderm a visit. "Batyr good boy. Go away," said Batyr. The news spread throughout the Soviet Union, and the zoo's attendance shot up. According to Kosinsky, "Batyr has about ten phrases, which we have recorded several times." A recording of Batyr—saying "Batyr is good", "Batyr is hungry", and using verbs like "drink" and "give"—was played on Kazakh state radio in 1980.

Vladimir Spitsyn, director of the Moscow Zoo, went down to Karaganda to see the marvel for himself. Alas, Batyr was depressed at the time and didn't say anything during the whole visit. Spitsyn found the tapes too indistinct to make a clear judgment, but he didn't think the whole thing was a publicity stunt.

By 1983, Batyr's vocabulary had risen to 20 phrases, including the local equivalent of "Have you watered the elephant?" "I think it's a crock," said Sandy Friedman, chair of the mammal department of Brookfield Zoo outside Chicago. "Given the way an elephant's mouth and tongue are arranged, I don't see how it can make words."

I suggest that Friedman's opinion was coloured by chauvinism and inter-zoo rivalry. Anyway, Batyr is now in pachyderm paradise and can mutter away to himself for eternity.

According to *Fortean Times* correspondent Izzet Goksu, the lead story of the Turkish television news on 20 March 1993 was a talking cat called Çingene (Gypsy) belonging to Mrs Ayfer Çelik of Izmir. The two-year-old black cat had green eyes and a penchant for cheese and chicken. Çingene managed to say at least seven words on television, including *ver* (give), Malan (a girl's name), Derya (another girl's name), *demem* (I don't say), *naynay* (baby talk for music), *nine* (colloquial word for grandmother) and *babaanne* (formal word for grandmother). These words, Goksu tells me, were clearly audible. Veterinarians examined the cat and confirmed its ability to talk.

Çelik turned down an offer of 150 million Turkish lira (about £10,000) for Çingene. She said she had first heard it talk at the age of three months when she was sitting in the waiting-room of a local vet. Çingene leapt from her lap to her neck, saying: "*Annem-mom*". Everyone was taken aback.

Perhaps Turkish is the most suitable language for cats. I put forward this hypothesis because I have a clipping here from the *Exeter Express & Echo* of 17 December 1968. It concerns a cat called Pala who belonged to a businessman in a Turkish town. Pala was able to say *anne* (mother), *baba* (father), *abla* (elder sister) and Kamile (the name of the owner's wife). The cat's gift of human language was authenticated by the chief veterinary surgeon of the (unnamed) town. It has just occurred to me that perhaps cats all over the world are talking Turkish, and we just don't notice.

Ten years ago, there was a seal called Hoover in the New England Aquarium in Boston who spoke English—or, at least, a few choice phrases. Hoover began to make odd noises during his adolescence in 1975 (a seal's adolescence comes at the age of four). Aquarium biologist Greg Early heard him say some words that sounded like English, so he and another man began trying to increase Hoover's vocabulary. By 1981, he could say: "Hello there", "How are you?", "Come over here", his name, and "Get out of here."

There was no indication that Hoover understood what he said, but as a colleague of Early's pointed out, "How can you be sure? You've never been a seal."

Paul Sieveking is editor of "Fortean Times"

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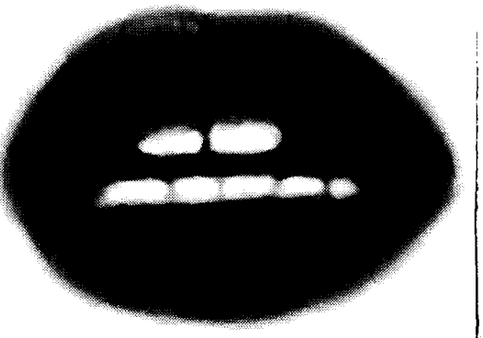

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